

MAGICKA®



THE NINTH ELEMENT

A Tale of Wizards

Dan McGirt



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by

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This novel is set long before the events in the Paradox Interactive games *Magicka* and *Magicka: Wizards of the Square Tablet*. The narration is made by Vlad sometime before the great Wizard Wars and gives you insight on early events that decided the fates of Grímnir and Fáfnir. You also get introduced to the two new characters Tuonetar and the somewhat unknown Davlo. Follow them in their quest to discover the secret behind the Ninth Element.

We hope you enjoy the first attempt at presenting *Magicka* in novel format, and we eagerly await your opinions in the Paradox forum.

Sincerely,

John Hargelid
Executive Wizard of *Magicka*

P.S. If you haven't played *Magicka* – what are you waiting for? An invitation? Well, here it is then, just for you!

[Visit the Magicka website](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan McGirt is not a Wizard, but he can do a couple of card tricks. Best known as the author of the comical Jason Cosmo fantasy adventure series, Dan dwells in the city called Atlanta in the land known as Georgia. He is a longtime member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) and the founder of the small press Trove Books. His hobbies away from the keyboard include hiking, kayaking, exploring old cemeteries, riding horses, and building homemade time machines. Visit Dan online at DanMcGirt.com.

PROLOGUE

Gather around, young Wizards! Sit a while and listen. Some of you have asked vot — erm, *what* — brings us to this terrible time of troubles and peril in Midgård. I, Count Vlad, am just the one to tell you! Yes, I will tell you everything, the whole story from the beginning!

Well, perhaps only the highlights, for the hour is late and soon the sun will rise. Not that I fear the sun in any way or am in the least bit inconvenienced by daylight! No, not at all.

But it *has* been a long night of celebrating. We are all proud of the one to four fine Wizards who, with my wise and indispensable guidance, saved the world from the daemon Assatur. They are a credit to my skills as an instructor, if I may say so! A pity they couldn't be here.

What's that? The story? How it all began? Yes, I was coming to that. The recent tumultuous events across Midgård have many causes. Many deep roots reaching far into the fertile soil of the past. Many tangled skeins of fate and happenstance intertwined like the pulsing veins of a ... pulsing ... pulsing ... did one of you happen to nick himself shaving? Yes? You? Go! Go at once! Go and fetch me, ah ... the thing I want ... from the storeroom. Which storeroom? The one farthest from here, at the bottom of the castle! You'll know it when you see it. Be on your way!

That was a close call. Now, where was I?

Ah, yes! The beginning.

Pay heed, now. We will skip the deep mists of time, the wars of gods and men, the lost magicks of forgotten ages. Let us say it all began, once upon a time, right here in Castle Aldrheim.

The Order of Magick was young then and the Castle in better repair. In those days, as now, our Order gathered from across Midgård the best and brightest young Wizards eager to learn the ways of Magick and join the respected ranks of wizardry.

Yes, respected!

As I said, this was some time ago.

Ahem. Our tale concerns four such young Wizards. One was a strikingly handsome young man of noble visage, and quite a dapper dresser. The others were also interesting in their own way ... but more about them in a moment.

What really got the Big Ball of Fate rolling down the Slippery Slope of Destiny was ... the Awful Bloody Murder!

1: AWFUL BLOODY MURDER

The Wizard Joad was dying and he knew it. He was dying not because he was old, but because he had been stabbed.

Several times.

With a sword.

Also, clubbed on the head with a blunt object.

At least twice.

Then set on fire.

He was still on fire, parts of him. He felt a strong burning sensation in his lower limbs and he smelled fresh barbecue.

But there was work yet to be done before he surrendered his spirit to Hel's embrace.

One final task he must complete.

A warning.

I must warn them.

I must warn them of the doom that is to come.

A short time earlier, Joad was not yet at Death's door, but was at the very least bleeding out on Death's front lawn after his late night nacho break had been interrupted by a mysterious intruder robed in purple who beat, stabbed and burned him.

"You won't ... get away ... with this," Joad rasped.

The killer's laugh was cruel and tinged with madness.

"Old fool." The voice from within the hood was hollow and spectral thanks to a cheap Amulet of Voice Distortion from a novelty shop. "I have what I came for."

The Purple Wizard waved a bloody sword for emphasis.

How odd, Joad thought, to see your own blood dripping from someone's sword. And so much of it.

"My death?" gasped Joad. "You will have it ... soon enough."

"Other hand," said the Purple Wizard.

Joad focused on the object in the killer's left hand. His eyes widened in horror.

"No!" said Joad.

"Yes."

"Not that! You can't ... take that."

"So you *do* know what it is. You have kept it to yourself all these years, Joad. But you are not worthy of its power."

"Not ... for power," rasped Joad. "I ... protect it."

The killer scoffed. "Yes, you're doing a fine job of that. But now it is mine."

"The danger. You don't know ... what it ... can do."

The Purple Wizard laughed. "It can make me the ruler of the world."

"Or ... *destroy* the world."

"Or that," agreed the killer. "Always a chance of that."

"You're mad!" accused Joad.

"You are not the first to call me so. But, soon all will call me master!" The killer thought for a moment. "Or, if the other thing happens, all will join you in death." The Purple Wizard shrugged. "Either outcome suits me."

"Who ... are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"That is ... why I asked."

The killer fumbled a bit to manage the bloody sword and the dangerous object that could destroy the world,

finally freeing one hand with which to deactivate the voice distorter.

“Do you recognize me now, Joad? The one you betrayed so long ago?”

“You!” said Joad.

“Yes, me!”

“Still alive!” said Joad.

“Still alive,” said the Purple Wizard. “Which is more than you can say.”

“I can yet say that I – *ack!*”

The Purple Wizard thrust the sword into Joad’s bloody breast.

“No, you have said quite enough – old friend.”

2: YIX-MEN

Such a terrible crime! Yet the Wizards of Castle Aldrheim remained oblivious to it as a new day dawned upon them. They carried on with their typical Wizard activities such as spell practice, research and experiments, snacking, studying old scrolls, polishing their staves, playing cards and taking naps.

For the youngest Wizards — those whose robes still had that fresh-from-the-tailor smell, and not the musty odor more typically associated with Wizards — it was training time. And so we now return to the four young Wizards of whom I spoke before. They stood in ranks with the rest of their class, a dozen gifted youngsters in all, before their beloved instructor, Professor Yix.

Yix, the senior tutor of the Order of Magick, was a Wizard with many decades of experience. She wore a dark yellow robe with a large *Y* rune (for Yix) emblazoned across the chest. Over her hood she wore a shiny egg-shaped helmet that gave the appearance of a bald human head. This helmet supposedly enabled Yix to communicate with OURBOROS, an electromechanical contraption she had built to “locate all the Wizards in the multiverse” so they could be recruited into the Order. Whether OURBOROS could actually locate unknown Wizards at a distance was unclear, but it was quite effective at electrocuting Yix’s unfortunate assistants during test runs.

In addition to electromechanical tinkering, Yix had mastered the art of ventriloquism. As she paced back and forth on a raised platform at the front of the peculiar chamber in which the Applied Magick class was assembled, Yix's uncanny voice seemed to penetrate their very brains from all directions.

"Hear me, my Yix-Men!"

"How could we not?" muttered a young Wizard robed in red. This was Grimmir, widely agreed to be the most brilliant student in his class. Even at that young age, Grimmir's understanding of the more subtle and difficult problems of Magick surpassed that of all his peers, as well as many of his instructors.

"Her voice rattles my brain," said the Wizard to Grimmir's right. He was clad in a food-stained green robe and was called Fafnir. Any understanding Fafnir had of the subtle and difficult problems of Magick was purely accidental.

"Unlikely!" scoffed the Wizard to the right of Fafnir. She was Tuonetar, and wore a yellow robe. She also favored clunky black boots adorned with an excess of silver buckles, not the practical curly-toed slippers that were then, as now, in fashion for Wizards. The distinctive *clomp!-clomp!* when Tuonetar stalked Aldrheim's halls gave ample warning of her approach, and sent most of her fellow Wizards scurrying for cover.

"Why not?" asked Fafnir.

Tuonetar leaned over to whisper, "Because you haven't two bits of brain to rub together inside your empty skull, Faf."

Next to Tuonetar stood the dashing handsome young Wizard known as V – erm – Davlo. Yes, Davlo. He was bright and quick and eager to make his mark as a Wizard. Resplendent in an exquisitely-tailored robe of rich, deep blue, Davlo commanded, "Hush, and heed our illustrious instructor."

Professor Yix continued. “You possess talents far beyond those of ordinary Wizards, my Yix-Men.”

“Why does she keep calling us that?” asked Fafnir.

“Because she is an egomaniac,” said Tuonetar.

“Shhh!” said Davlo.

“You are the future of the Order of Magick,” continued Yix. “It will be your duty to travel about the realm of Midgård, perform good deeds, help those in need, and defend the innocent through the power of Magick. It is my duty to prepare you for this noble calling.”

Yix stalked across the platform to a bulky metal console featuring several dials, knobs and blinking lights. More than a few such electromechanical devices were scattered through Castle Aldrheim, chiefly in the lower levels. These appliances were built long, long ago. Their makers were forgotten, their warranties expired, their instruction manuals lost in the deep recesses of forgotten cubbyholes. Consequently, no Wizard fully understood how the machines worked. Some were of obvious function – open a door, retract a bridge, compact garbage. A handy machine in the kitchen washed dishes, if you poured in a few buckets of water and added a cake of soap. Other devices were of more mysterious purpose, such as the countdown clock under the hatch in the garden. Most of the gadgets required an occasional jolt of Lightning to keep working. This particular unit was installed at Yix’s direction and modified to her specifications (at the cost of several unfortunate electrocutions.)

Yix patted the console and said, “As Yix-Men, you must train and study harder than you can possibly imagine! You must master Magick in every practical application, including combat!”

“Cool,” said Fafnir.

“That is why I built this Dangerous Room,” said Yix. “This refurbished dungeon chamber holds traps and tests to hone your spellcasting skills under pressure. As you

improve, the Dangerous Room will adapt, pushing you harder, ever harder, until you reach your potential — or until you break. For not all will prove worthy to be Yix-Men!”

“I thought we were already Yix-Men,” muttered Fafnir. “Are we or aren’t we?”

“Only if we prove worthy,” said Davlo. “Pay attention.”

“How, you may ask, does the Dangerous Room work?” said Yix.

Davlo raised his hand. “Professor, tell us, how does it work?”

“Teacher’s pet,” hissed Tuonetar.

“An excellent question!” said Yix. “Observe as I turn this knob, which controls the challenge level of the Dangerous Room. The first setting is Mildly Unsafe. Two is Slightly Risky. Three, A Little Bit Dangerous, and so on — yes, Davlo?”

“How many settings are there?”

“It goes to eleven.”

“Most dials stop at ten,” said Grimmir.

“Mine goes to eleven,” said Yix.

“And what happens at eleven?” asked Tuonetar.

Yix shook her head slowly, as if contemplating something awful. “Eleven is the terminal setting: Certain Death.” She twisted the dial all the way to eleven as she spoke.

“Terminal?” said Tuonetar. “Is it too late to drop this class?”

“Yes,” said Yix. “But fear not. Naturally, the Certain Death setting is for advanced Wizards only. For your first time in the Dangerous Room, I will dial it back to one. My purpose today is to familiarize you with — Ah! It seems to be stuck! No matter, I’ll give it a good whack and — Heimdall’s bunions! The knob broke off in my hand! And still set on Certain Death.”

A murmur went through the class. Yix raised her hands

for order. “Fear not, Yix-Men! I will summon the Lowly maintenance crew to make immediate repairs. None of the deadly traps will activate unless I should pull *this* lever, which – Galloping gods! It slipped into gear at the slightest touch!”

Yix grabbed the errant lever with both hands and pulled hard to return it to the OFF position. With a disheartening **CRACK!** and a spray of splinters, the wooden handle snapped off at the base.

“Odin’s ointment!” cursed Yix, stomping one foot in frustration. “There is no cause for alarm, my Yix-Men! It is likely the mechanism did not engage.”

KER-KLUNK!

The floor shook with rhythmic vibrations. Unseen wheels and gears clicked and whirred with a metallic clanging. A huge iron plate descended to block the door. Sections of the floor slid open to reveal:

A fire pit! (Filled with roaring flames.)

A snake pit! (Writhing with live snakes.)

A pit of spikes! (Some of them rusty.)

A goldfish pool! (Especially terrifying – everyone knows Wizards can’t swim.)

“Hmm,” said Yix. “It occurs to me the Dangerous Room should have an emergency override for situations such as this. If only that thought had occurred to me during the design phase.”

“What does that mean?” demanded Grimnir.

Yix sighed. “It means your first Dangerous Room session will be your last.” Yix shook her head sadly. “So much for the golden age. Maybe next generation.”

“We’re not dead yet!” said Tuonetar.

“Close enough,” said Yix. “But the good news is, in the unlikely event any of you survive, you will receive an A for the course, per policy. Good luck!”

Professor Yix did a hasty Teleport to the safety of the faculty lounge. Alas, the class had yet to learn that magick.

3: THE DANGEROUS ROOM

Every surface of the room sprouted threats. There were knives and spikes and spinning razors! Automated arrows and spears ready to launch! Poison fumes billowing from vents high and low! Strangely glowing crystals in the ceiling!

The Wizards crowded together back-to-back, clutching their staves. Each held the basic wooden Wizard staff issued by the Order of Magick to its members – nothing fancy, just an inch-thick length of spruce or pine, sanded smooth. The Order bought its staves in bulk from master carver Máni One-Thumb, who topped each staff with his trademark half-moon “catcher”, hand-carved and soundly fitted to the shaft. The catcher is the focus for a Wizard’s channeling of elements into spells. In the crook of each wooden half-moon flickered a ball of blue-white elemental light indicating an active staff, ready for spellcasting.

Unfortunately, the basic staff does not come loaded with innate defenses as do many high-end models and custom jobs. If a Wizard is in a state of confused panic and neglects to actually cast a spell of protection the staff will not do it for him. Such was the case for most of the class.

Most, but not all.

“Don’t stand there shaking in your slippers!” barked Grimmir, taking charge quite naturally. “Shields and Earth Walls! Everyone! Now!”

Even as Grimmir spoke, the Dangerous Room attacked. A volley of flaming arrows riddled a poor Turq. Pierced by a dozen fiery shafts, he fell back against Hrot and Elji. Turq's turquoise robe was lit up like a Yule log. Unfortunately, flame-retardant safety robes were not yet in vogue. The fire jumped quickly from Turq's robe to the garments of his classmates. And with the flames spread – fear!

“*Abbbb!*” screeched Hrot. “Fire! I’m on fire!”

“I’m burning!” said Elji. “Hot! Hot! Hot!”

Forgetting what they were taught to do when on fire – (Self-cast Water. Or, if that fails, drop and roll) – the pair let poor Turq collapse in a smoldering heap and ran in circles around the room, waving their arms and shouting, which only fanned the flames to greater intensity.

“Hold still, you idiots!” barked Tuonetar.

Tuonetar, channeled a stream of elemental Water from her staff and hosed the pair down. Her rescue doused the flames and saved their lives, at least for the moment.

“Blast everything!” shouted Oski, deciding to panic in a different way. “Blast it all!”

Planting his feet and holding his staff two-handed at his hip, Oski swept the far wall with an crackling Death beam. A foolish plan, but to Oski's credit, he disarmed a swooping pendulum blade, intercepted a poison-tipped spear and dismembered a sword-swinging animated suit of armor that lurched from a hidden alcove.

Then Oski's beam struck one of the crystals in the ceiling. A violent explosion shattered Oski's staff, broke his arm, and vaulted him into the air. He narrowly missed being sliced and diced by the razor blades of a giant ceiling fan – only to plunge head first into the snake pit, where the venomous vipers made short work of him.

“The door!” shouted Pinky. She charged her staff with Lightning. “We must open the door!”

“No!” said Grimmir. “Stand together!”

Fafnir, Davlo and Tuonetar closed ranks with Grimnir and channeled glowing golden elemental Shields and stony defensive walls of Earth as they had drilled many, many times in Introduction to Shields and Defenses their freshman year. This is basic wizardry: when in doubt, hide behind a Shield! Alas, it is a tactic too oft forgotten when crunch time comes – which is a good way to get crunched.

Pinky released a full-charge Lightning blast at the metal door. In theory, this was a good idea – Open the door! What could be more obvious? Alas, despite lacking other safety features, the Dangerous Room was well-insulated to prevent its many fatal effects from harming any unsuspecting Wizard who might be walking past in the corridor outside. Pinky's Lightning rebounded from the door and bounced around the room, seeking other targets and settling on the dripping wet Hrot and Elji, who were instantly electrocuted.

“Sorry!” said Pinky.

Davlo waved his arms frantically. “Pinky! Shield! Now! Now!”

Too late.

The crystals in the ceiling were Element Gems. When properly tuned, such gems are prisms that channel deadly spell-like bursts of pure elemental power. Pinky learned this firsthand as she was vaporized by intersecting cones of Fire, Lightning, Cold, and a spray of fast-moving Earth pellets.

When the pink mist that was Pinky dissolved, the murderous gems trained their elemental barrage on Grimnir and his three friends, battering at their defenses with boulder falls, thunderbolts, flame strikes, meteor swarms, hailstones, glacier blasts, storm spirals, and vile voltage.

“We are going to die,” said Tuonetar.

“No kidding!” said Fafnir. “We’re doomed!”

“Less chatter!” snapped Grimnir. “Hold your Shield! Davlo, more Earth! The attack can’t last forever!”

“Nor can we,” said Tuonetar.

Davlo nodded. “Grimnir, my friend, we will surely tire before the Dangerous Room.”

“Maybe,” said Grimnir. “But I have a plan ...”

4: THINKING FAST

Seven remained. Grimnir, Davlo, Tuonetar, Fafnir stood together near the center of the Dangerous Room. Nearby, Sadr, Thekk, and Vidrir formed their own triangle of protection. The Element Gems kept up their assault for what seemed an eternity of crackling flames, sizzling beams, and thumping stones. In truth, the barrage lasted less than a minute. Then, abruptly, the gems went silent and dimmed to a standby glow.

Grimnir chose this moment to educate his peers on Element Gems. “I suspect each gem makes a certain pre-determined sequence of attacks. They have completed the sequence and are resetting.”

“Fat lot of good that does us,” said Sadr.

“This is our chance to destroy them,” said Grimnir.

“How?” asked Tuonetar.

Grimnir waved his hand to take in the six gems embedded in the ceiling. “It appears each gem is tuned to a single element. Does anyone disagree?”

“I wasn’t exactly taking notes,” said Thekk.

“Yeah, so what?” said Vidrir.

“Is it not obvious?” said Grimnir impatiently.

“Uh ... no?” said Sadr.

Grimnir shook his head in exasperation. “Each gem resonates to one element, and is thus vulnerable to the

opposing element. Attack each gem with its counter-element and we can shatter them!”

Sadr frowned. “Are you sure that will work?”

“Have you a better idea?” said Grimnir.

“Er ... no,” said Sadr. “But that doesn’t make your idea a good one!”

“Grimnir is right!” said Davlo. “We must fight back!”

“Must we?” said Sadr. “Because I think waiting nice and snug behind our defenses until someone comes to rescue us is a pretty good idea.” Thekk and Vidrir nodded their agreement.

“Cower if you will,” said Grimnir. “I prefer to rescue myself.”

“I will help you, my friend,” said Davlo. “Which first?”

“The Death gem, there,” said Grimnir.

“I’ll cover you with an area Shield,” said Tuonetar. “Help me out, Faf.”

Tuonetar and Fafnir expanded and merged their personal Shields to envelop their companions, allowing Grimnir and Davlo to drop their own defensive spells and concentrate on their attack.

Grimnir and Davlo aimed their staves, directing verdant beams of pure Life at the Death gem. The stone shook violently, gave off a high-pitched whine, then shattered.

“Now the Fire gem!” said Grimnir.

The remaining Element Gems, as if stirred awake by the demise of one of their own, flared once again and renewed their all-out attack.

Davlo and Grimnir focused their minds on the element of pristine Cold, manifested as icy beams of absolute absence of heat. Their two beams converged in mid-air, forming a single stronger beam that overcame a barrage of fireballs and shattered the gem of Fire.

“Great job!” said Sadr, pumping a victorious fist above his head. “Never doubted you for a moment!”

By unspoken agreement, Grimnir and Davlo brought

forth Fire to destroy the gem of Cold with sheets of flame. They next channeled elemental Earth in the form of a blast of stone pellets to crush the gem of Water.

“Our spell drills have paid off,” said Davlo.

“Indeed,” said Grinnir.

Davlo and Grinnir were frequent study and practice partners. Few other students could match Grinnir’s proficiency in channeling and combining the elements. Even Davlo, who was no slouch himself, admired his friend’s easy way with Magick. Just as a great composer seems to produce beautiful music effortlessly, so was Grinnir’s facility with crafting spells.

Their companions cheered as the devastating duo systematically smashed one gem after another. Grinnir and Davlo had long since memorized the Table of Elemental Oppositions and thus lost not an instant in hesitation trying to remember what beats what.

Soon only a pair of Lightning gems set above the control platform remained. These crackling crystals put up a terrific fight, throwing so much lightning that all the Wizards’ robes began sticking to each other from the excess static and sparks danced off their belt buckles.

It seemed even the combined efforts of Grinnir and Davlo would not be enough. But Thekk, Vidrir and Sadr rediscovered their courage and joined spells of Water and Earth with those of Grinnir and Davlo. Yielding to this combined assault, the Lightning gems flickered on and off, gave off a shower of sparks, then shorted out with a **POP!** and a hiss.

A weary, wary silence settled upon the Dangerous Room. The taste of fresh ozone mingled in the air with the sickening scents of burnt flesh and fatal nerve gas. Tuonetar thoughtfully Pushed the toxic fumes to the farthest corner with a gust of air, then neutralized the poison with a burst of Life force.

Tense and jumpy, hearts pounding, nervous sweat

flowing, the survivors crouched behind renewed Walls and Shields and waited for the next threat.

But none appeared.

“We’re safe now,” said Thekk. His voice came out a squeak. Everyone pretended not to notice. “Don’t you think?”

“Let’s find out,” said Grinnir. He dismissed his Shield.

Nothing tried to kill him.

Davlo followed Grinnir’s example. One by one the rest dropped their defenses.

The Dangerous Room shut itself down. Sections of floor extended to cover the deadly pits. Launchers for arrows, knives, and other unpleasant projectiles retracted into the walls. Hatches and portholes slammed shut.

“The danger has ended,” said Grinnir.

“I guess death wasn’t so certain after all,” said Sadr.

“It was for some,” said Tuonetar, indicating the charred remains of Turq and a few surviving scraps of Pinky’s robe.

“Let’s get out of here!” said Thekk, starting toward the control platform. “I bet I can jiggle a switch and get the door open.”

“Good idea!” said Sadr. “Come on, Vidrir!”

Sadr and Vidrir followed close behind Thekk.

“Careful!” said Tuonetar. “You idiots will start it up again!”

“Fah!” said Thekk. “I’m handy with the machines. I built an automaton toothbrush, you know!”

“Please be care—”

WHOOMP!

A long section of the left wall slammed across the room until it hit the right wall, mashing Sadr, Thekk and Vidrir into paste.

The masher snapped back into place, resetting with a smug **KA-CHUNK!** Bloody bits of Wizard slid down both walls.

“Wonder if I can have his toothbrush?” said Fafnir.

5: GAME OVER

“Now what?” said Tuonetar.

“Now I go to the control and open the door,” said Grimmir.

“What!” said Tuonetar. “Best we not touch *anything*. Someone will come for us.”

“Will they?” said Grimmir.

“Professor Yix is surely on the way to save us,” said Davlo.

“She’s taking her sweet time,” said Fafnir, tugging at his collar. “And it’s getting stuffy in here.”

Grimmir’s mind was made up. “We cannot risk waiting for help. The room could restart on its own at any moment. I will open the door. It may not stay open for long. Be ready to jump through.”

“And what about you?” said Tuonetar, extending her arms to indicate the distance from the platform to the door. “How will you jump through?”

“I will manage,” said Grimmir.

Grimmir let his mind’s eye focus on that notional space where Wizards channel the elements into spells. Each Wizard has his or her own way of envisioning the elements. Fafnir saw them as ingredients of a sandwich that he mentally stacked. For Tuonetar, they were bars of color she arranged in the desired order. Davlo pictured the flash cards

beginning Wizards train with, each marked with the rune representing an element.

Grimnir dispensed with such mnemonic crutches. He tried to picture the elements as they moved through the Void, apprehending what each looked, felt, tasted and smelled like in its pure essence. He had spent many hours alone contemplating each element in turn, straining every fiber of his brain to imagine what it was to BE an element – to be an all-consuming orb of Fire ... to ride the Lightning across the sky ... to peel order and causation apart as the entropic energy of Death ... to suffuse and animate matter as Life ... and so forth.

This was an unusual approach. Most Wizards are content if they can get the elements to do what they want most of the time. Explaining *how* a spell works isn't important, so long as it works. Worrying, as Grimnir did, about what elements were made of or whether anti-elements existed or where the bread went when it was replaced with toast, was missing the whole point. The typical Wizard's attitude is: *It's Magick! Be happy you can do Magick and stop asking questions!*

All of which is to say that when Grimnir queued up a combination of elements to prepare a spell, he imagined a cluster of elemental spheres arranging themselves on a cosmic grid. At this moment he brought Lightning, Death and Fire together in the sub-space of his mind.

"You'll be a smear on the wall," said Tuonetar. "You can't outrun that masher."

Grimnir smiled knowingly. "I can if I ... make Hastel!"

The air around Grimnir shimmered like heat rising from sun-baked ground on a hot summer day as he cast his magick. His form became a blur, difficult to see without squinting. He spoke, but his words were unintelligible as the thrum of a hummingbird's wings.

A red blur shot across the room.

Then Grimnir stood on the control platform.

WHOOOMP! went the masher – but much too late to catch Grimmir. The homicidal hardware seemed a bit grumpy as it slunk back into place.

“Of course he knows Haste,” grumped Tuonetar, stamping one boot on the floor with a thump. “He’s always reading ahead.”

Indeed, Grimmir had successfully conjured one of the special abilities known as *magicks*. Magicks are a bit more difficult to master than spells, often requiring the use of special incantations or objects. This, we are told, is because all the required elements simply will not fit in the mind of the Wizard. Most Wizards then, as now, found magicks quite challenging. In those days, only eight of the many magicks employed today were in open use among Wizards. Some magicks were hidden and others had been forgotten and would be rediscovered in years to come. The student Wizards had not yet formally progressed to learning the magicks. Grimmir, being Grimmir, was not one to wait.

“Most impressive,” said Davlo, nodding his approval. “But can you operate the controls?”

“Perhaps,” said Grimmir absently. He studied the dashboard of knobs, dials and buttons before him. The elements he knew better than any other student. Machines were another matter. No one is perfect.

“Perhaps?” said Tuonetar. “You’re risking our lives on *perhaps?*”

“Life is risk,” said Grimmir. “One of these must open the door.”

“Or turn on the death traps again!” said Tuonetar.

Ignoring her protest, Grimmir reached for a knob.

Before he could turn it, the door to the Dangerous Room opened ...

6: REMEMBER TO SAVE

It was Professor Yix! She was accompanied by a crew of the Lowly familiars who did all the cooking, washing, scrubbing, fetching, grouting, rat-catching, and other tasks too time-consuming, difficult or unpleasant for Wizards to do themselves. Proper wizardry, after all, requires much time spent in study, contemplation, feasting and rest – not wasted scrubbing floors and mending robes.

“Quickly!” said Professor Yix, addressing the Lowlies. “We must give these unfortunate students a proper disposal in the dungeon furnace and then dismantle the Dangerous Room before - *Yieee!*”

Yix jumped back in fright as Davlo stepped into view.

“Professor Yix!” said Davlo. “We have been waiting for you!”

“Gah!” said Yix. She swatted the air in Davlo’s general direction. “Away with you, ghost! Haunt me not! I am blameless in your no doubt painful death.”

“I am not a ghost,” said Davlo. He stretched forth his hand so Yix could feel its solidity. The senior Wizard recoiled as if offered a hissing cobra.

“Oh, point not your accusing finger at me!” said Yix. “Torment me not, restless shade. Go! Go to your eternal reward! Be gone! Shoo!”

“But I am *not* a ghost!” insisted Davlo.

"You mock me," moaned Yix. "None could survive the Dangerous Room. I beseech you, O spirit, have pity and go away!"

"I am not dead," said Davlo. "Behold! We four live!"

Fafnir and Tuonetar joined Davlo in the doorway. Grimmir made Haste to stand with them. The masher didn't even bother this time.

"Egad!" said Yix.

"Yes, your worship?" said a hunchbacked Lowly, shuffling forward.

"Not you, Egad." Yix clutched her staff more tightly to still her trembling hand. "I was merely startled to see so many survivors."

Egad bobbed his head. "You mean such survivors as could tell a Committee of Inquiry what happened down here in your special playroom?" said Egad. "The room that you, the great Professor Yix, personally designed and directed the constructing of?"

"Yes, Egad," said Yix. "That is what I mean." She adjusted her robe and cleared her throat. "Naturally, I knew that if any of my Yix-Men could survive the Dangerous Room, it would be my four most brilliant students! I am pleased you overcame this entirely unforeseeable tragedy."

"But, your baldness," said Egad. "It *was* foreseen, remember? Remember that idealistic young royal building inspector who said how your design was flawed before he was transferred to the most distant frontier of ... Oh. Right." Egad gave an exaggerated shrug. "Who could have seen this coming?"

"Only we four remain to tell the tale," said Grimmir.

"Ah," said Yix. "Before we get on about telling tales, we should take a moment to be sure we agree on what tale we want to tell. Or not tell, as it may be."

"Do we all get an A, as you promised?" asked Grimmir.

"Er ... yes! Naturally!"

"Then I'm sure we all agree this was tragic accident no

one could have seen coming,” said Grimmir.

“I knew I could count on my Yix-Men!” said Yix.

“Do please stop calling us that,” said Tuonetar.

“What? Why?” asked Yix.

Grimmir counted off the reasons finger by finger. “One, *your* Dangerous Room just killed most of your ‘Yix-Men’. Two, we are Wizards of the Order of Magick. To name us something else smacks of divided loyalties.”

“Not at all my intent!” said Yix.

“And three, it’s lame,” injected Tuonetar.

“It is?” said Yix.

“Oh, very,” said Fafnir, shaking his head vigorously. “I hate to say so, but it truly is.”

“I see,” said Yix. Her shoulders slumped.

“I thought it quite a jaunty name, Professor,” said Davlo. “And your dream of Wizards and non-Wizards working together to make the world better is one we all share.”

“Thank you, Davlo,” said Professor Yix, brightening a bit.

“The dream will never die,” said Davlo. “But considering two-thirds of the class did ...”

Yix sighed. “Yes, I suppose you are right. Very well, the Yix-Men are no more!”

“But you *can* bring them back, can’t you?” asked Tuonetar. “I know there is Magick to resurrect the dead.”

“Resurrection?” Yix shook her head sadly. “Impossible.”

“But, your forgetfulness,” said Egad, tugging at Yix’s sleeve. “You were just saying as we strolled down here at a leisurely pace what a shame we should find all the poor students dead and how it would be a great bother to Resurrect them and have them blabbing about getting killed and filing complaints and whatnot. Better, you said, to just pop their remains in the furnace and be done with it. It sounded to me like you *could* bring them back from the dead

if you wanted, though at some inconvenience and potential embarrassment to your own self. Don't you remember?"

Yix stared a moment at the Lowly familiar before saying, a bit icily, "Thank you, Egad."

"Always happy to be of service," said Egad.

Yix made a huffing sound. "Egad mistook my words. What I said was that Resurrection is a serious magick, and not to be undertaken lightly."

"That's your meaning as I took it," said Egad, bobbing his head. "Exactly what I thought you meant. The very thing."

"You must bring them back if you can," said Tuonetar. "You owe your students no less."

Yix grimaced. "Even if possible, it may be unwise."

"Unwise to have more witnesses as might testify about the malfunctioning murder room, she means," said Egad. "Dead Wizards tell no tales, she said before."

"Egad ..." said Yix.

"Ah, no need to thank me again, Professor," said Egad, as he excavated an impressive clot of earwax, which clung to the tip of his finger like a gooey yellow-brown boutonniere. He flung it off and winced as it flew and stuck to the side of Yix's helmet. "Ah ... I am here to serve."

"I'm one Wizard who may have a tale to tell if you don't put things right," said Tuonetar. She raised a clenched fist and stomped her foot.

Yix got the distinct feeling someone had just walked on *her* grave. "Naturally, I will do what I can," she said hurriedly. There is a good chance anyone we bring back to life won't remember a thing anyway. No harm, no foul, eh?"

"If you say so, Professor," said Tuonetar, her voice laced with icy scorn.

"The thing to understand about Resurrection," said Yix, assuming a more confident professorial tone, "is it can only bring back the mostly dead, not the truly and sincerely dead.

So let's see what we have here." Yix studied the burnt husk of Turq. "Fire arrows, eh? I quite forgot we added those. Yes, Toasty here we can fix."

"That was Turq," said Tuonetar.

"Quite so." Yix noticed the stains on the wall that had been Vidrir, Sadr and Thekk. "Did the masher take three with one swat?" There was a faint note of pride in her voice.

"It did," confirmed Grimmir.

Yix crossed the room for a closer look, trailed closely by Egad. "Hmm, I suppose there is enough to work with here. Egad, I'll need these three scraped into separate jars."

Egad used his sleeve to wipe away a snot bubble. "Of course, your empathy."

"Poor Pinky was vaporized," said Tuonetar. "I don't think there is anything left of her."

Yix winced. "Tricky. One generally needs some scrap of the deceased to work with."

"Flypaper might catch a few vapors," suggested Egad.

Yix appeared dubious, but nodded. "Yes, yes," she said.

"Oski fell in the snake pit," said Fafnir.

Yix shuddered. "I hate snakes. We almost went with carnivorous toads there, but snakes were cheaper."

"We can retrieve the body," said Egad. "We only have to gas the snakes first."

"Good, good," said Yix. "Excellent suggestion, Egad. Best thing for snakes. And these two – lightning?" She frowned at the shocked looks frozen on Hrot and Elji's dead faces. "Fixable, I should think. They might need to avoid wool socks for a while though." Yix shrugged. "No guarantees on any of them, but as they're only newly dead, Resurrection should be effective."

"We know you will do your best, Professor," said Davlo.

"Indeed, I—" Yix abruptly stiffened. She sniffed the air. "Does anyone else smell smoke?"

7: FIRE IN THE HOLE

Indeed they did. A sweetly acrid purple haze hung in the air, drifting into the Dangerous Room from the dimly lit dungeon corridor outside.

“Where there is smoke there is often fire,” said Professor Yix. “Come, my Yix-M ... er, students!”

Leaving Egad and the other familiars behind to clean the Dangerous Room, Yix led the young Wizards down the corridor at a brisk walk, following the trail of smoke. Sputtering torches set in sconces lit their way, but these were plainly not the source of the strange purple smoke.

The group soon reached the last torch. Its flickering light reflected off the bars of a surprisingly rust-free portcullis through which the purple smoke streamed.

This gate marked a boundary between the known and the unknown. The dungeons beneath Aldrheim are ancient and extensive. Many of the lower passages predate the construction of the castle itself. Dozens, if not hundreds, of mysterious chambers have been sealed and forgotten over the long years, whether due to remodeling, excessive mold and mildew, simple disuse ... or for darker reasons.

Yix stared at the gate as if making a difficult decision.

“Professor, what lies beyond?” asked Davlo.

Without answering, Yix jolted a panel inset in the wall beneath the torch with a small flash of Lightning. The

portcullis rose into the ceiling.

“Come!” said Yix. “Hurry now!”

With no more torches to light the way, Yix caused the arc of light at the tip of her staff to brighten so that it illuminated a small area around her. The other Wizards followed their teacher’s example.

The damp floor of the corridor sloped downward at a fair incline, sharp enough that the Wizards had to lean backward slightly lest their own weight send them stumbling forward at an involuntary run.

“I think my ears just popped,” said Fafnir. “How deep does this passage go?”

Yix shook her head. “I do not know.”

“But you have been this way before,” said Grimmir. His words were more statement than question.

Yix nodded slightly, but made no comment. The student Wizards exchanged glances and shrugged. Strange things were said to happen down here, and more than one Wizard was said to have ventured past the torches never to return. But Professor Yix seemed to know where she was going, which was somewhat reassuring.

As the young Wizards knew well, Castle Aldrheim is an ancient structure, built on a bluff above a tangled maze of natural caverns and tunnels that have never been fully explored. There are those who believe that somewhere deep in that winding, twisting subterranean world is the Cradle of Magick, the cave where great Wizilur, the First Wizard, had the Insight that the elements can be channeled and combined into spells – the foundation of all Wizard Magick.

The way to Wizilur’s Cave is now lost to Wizards, though many have perished seeking it. Indeed, some sages say the story of the Cave is purely allegorical and that even if there is a physical cave, it is likely no more than a subterranean theater for abstruse shadow puppetry, and of no redeeming philosophical or geological value.

Whatever the young Wizards thought of such stories,

they could not deny the excitement of racing through dark and unknown ways to investigate this mystery with Professor Yix. It certainly beat almost dying in the Dangerous Room.

“We must hurry!” said Yix, as the floor leveled off again. “This way!” She turned abruptly into a side passage. Here the smoke was thicker, hovering and roiling near the arched ceiling of the corridor like a bank of storm clouds.

Yix led the students down a short stairway that opened into a small rectangular gallery. On three sides the walls were polished smooth. The wall opposite the stair was of unfinished stone. From some hidden hole or vent near the ceiling above it boiled a steady stream of the purple smoke.

“Tor’s toenails!” said Yix. “It is as I feared!”

“What is?” said Tuonetar. “What is making this smoke? Is it dangerous?”

“Dangerous?” Yix slapped her forehead. “We must evacuate the castle! All of you, back upstairs at once! Sound the alarm! I will stay here and do what I can to prevent disaster.”

“What disaster?” asked Davlo. “What is this place?”

“What is behind that wall?” demanded Grimmir.

“No time for questions!” said Yix. “Go! Run! Tell everyone to get out!”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” commanded a new voice, speaking from behind the group. “Stay right where you are.”

8: KEYS TO THE MYSTERY

Yix and the four young Wizards whirled about to find themselves face to face – or hood to hood, rather – with Fandulf the Almost Wise, the gray-robed master Wizard who was in those days the head of the Order of Magick.

“No one move,” said Fandulf. He rapped his great hornwood staff on the floor for emphasis.

“You see the smoke!” said Yix. “If there is a fire *here*, we are all in danger! We must warn the others!”

“Nonsense,” said Fandulf. “We warn no one. For to warn them would reveal a secret that you and I are sworn to keep at any cost.” Two flashes like eyes of blue fire shone from Fandulf’s hood. It was a trick he did to show he meant business. “Any cost,” he repeated. “Or have you forgotten, Yix?”

“No,” said Professor Yix. “Of course not.”

Fandulf jabbed a finger at the young Wizards. “Then why have you brought these students here?”

“I didn’t know we were coming here!” said Yix. “Not at first. By the time I realized from where the smoke was coming it was too late to send them back.”

“Their presence presents a dilemma,” said Fandulf.

“How so?” asked Grimnir, a touch defiant.

“You know too much, young Grimnir,” said Fandulf. “Which means we dare not send you upstairs to blab to the others.”

“Blab what?” said Grimmir. “That strange smoke issues from a blank wall deep beneath the castle? That the mere hint of a fire in this spot frightens the two highest Wizards of the Order? Tell me, why should we not share such curious facts as these with our peers?”

“We’re not blabbers,” said Davlo, elbowing his way past Grimmir.

“Er, I am,” said Fafnir. “Can’t help it.”

Fandulf chuckled. “Self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom, Fafnir.”

Fafnir cocked his head to one side in puzzlement. “What’s wisdom got to do with anything?”

“It will come to you eventually, Faf,” said Tuonetar. She gave him a friendly thump on the head. “Or not.”

“What are you hiding?” demanded Grimmir, stepping past Davlo. “We have a right to know.”

“Do you now?” said Fandulf, with a hint of mockery. He shook his head. “Right or wrong, here you are. We cannot send you back. Yet if you stay, you will learn even more that you should not know.” He sighed. “There is nothing for it now. Perhaps fate brought you here.”

“Professor Yix brought us,” said Fafnir.

“Be it so,” said Fandulf. “We must act swiftly. Yix, have you your key?”

“I do,” said Professor Yix.

“Then bring it forth, for we must open the Forbidden Chamber!”

Fandulf brandished a bronze medallion the size of a chocolate chip cookie. Or half a cookie – for Fandulf’s talisman was part of a disk snapped in two. It was embossed with peculiar symbols representing an alphabet long forgotten by all but the most learned scholars. And even they couldn’t read it.

“Behold!” said Fandulf, because he could not resist saying such things, “The First Key!”

After giving the students time to be properly impressed,

Professor Yix reached into her own sleeve and palmed a similar semi-circular medallion – the missing mate of Fandulf’s key. “I have the Second Key,” she said.

“Then let it be done,” intoned Fandulf.

The two senior Wizards stepped up to the smoking wall, standing a bit beyond arm’s length apart. Each placed a half of the medallion against a specific indentation on the wall. The pieces clicked snugly into place.

Fandulf and Yix turned the keys.

There was a muffled clunk inside the wall. Then the section of wall between Yix and Fandulf slid open with a ponderous grinding of stone on stone and a creak of hidden hinges in need of oil. A great rush of purple smoke billowed outward. Fandulf and Yix fanned it away with a dual gust of magick wind.

“Come,” said Fandulf.

He strode through the door.

Yix and the four students followed.

9: THE FORBIDDEN CHAMBER

“Welcome to the Forbidden Chamber of Forbidden things,” said Fandulf. He gestured grandly with his staff. “Few Wizards in all the history of our Order have entered this place.”

“Wow,” said Fafnir. “It’s big!”

The six Wizards stood at one end of a vast hall. The high-vaulted ceiling soared nearly one hundred feet above them, supported by two towering rows of massive marble pillars that marched off into a shadowy distance. Huge, ornately carved lanterns hung from the columns. Perhaps a quarter of the lamps were lit, glowing with thin, flameless light. The rest were dark, leaving much of the cavernous chamber shrouded in gloom.

Even so, the group could discern the outlines of the space. A central aisle, like a processional, lay open between the pillars. The rest of the chamber was given over to precarious stacks of crates and barrels and row upon row of tall wooden shelves buckling under the weight of their burdens.

“It’s a junk room,” said Tuonetar.

“This is not junk,” said Fandulf. “At least, most of it isn’t.”

“It’s Magick,” said Grimmir. “Everything here reeks and tastes of Magick.”

“You can taste Magick?” said Fafnir.

Grimnir shrugged. “Sometimes.” He turned to Fandulf. “But where is the fire?”

“There is none,” said Fandulf. “It seems we have been deceived.”

Yix nodded as she examined a golden brazier near the door. “This was the source of the smoke, which ceased as soon as we entered.” She looked to Fandulf with concern. “It may have been a signal. An alarm.”

Fandulf nodded gravely. “Or a call for help. I am relieved to find no inferno raging, but we had best take a look around before assuming all is well. Come along.”

Fandulf led the way. The shelves, Davlo noted as they walked, were arranged in parallel rows ten or more deep to either side of the central aisle down which they walked. The visible shelves held chests, boxes, bags, jars and numerous loose objects, piled and sorted indifferently. One shelf was stuffed with formless cloth-wrapped bundles bound in chains. Some of these squirmed and writhed, making the chains rattle.

The deeper they went into the Forbidden Chamber the more evident it became that this place was indeed more treasure vault than junk pile. Davlo and the others gaped in wonder at what they saw:

Racks and stacks of swords, staves and wands. Some were plain, others chased in gold and silver, engraved with elaborate runes or adorned with precious jewels.

Row after row of crystal orbs and other spheres. These came in many colors. Some glowed with inner light, others seemed to be filled with vapors, strange smokes, or the shimmering images of unknown faces and distant lands. One appeared to be an oracular billiard ball.

There were bins and buckets and trays full of rings, beads, necklaces, arm bands, bracelets, and other jewelry fashioned of gold, silver, bronze, copper or metals unknown.

A long row of hat racks covered with crowns, helmets, hats, hoods and snoods.

Corselets and shirts and coats of mail. Shields of all shapes and sizes, painted or plain.

Piles of cloaks and robes. Some were velvet and silk and richly trimmed with fur. Others looked like rags the most pitiful beggar wouldn't wear.

Certain treasures caught the eye of each young Wizard.

"Look at all that gold!" said Fafnir. He started toward a mound of ingots and ancient coins that spilled across the floor.

Fandulf grabbed Fafnir by his robe and yanked him back. "That is cursed dragon gold, you fool!" he said. "Don't touch it."

"Are those rubies?" asked Tuonetar, pointing out a silver casket full of oddly radiant red stones.

"No. Those are cursed soul stealers," said Fandulf. "Don't touch."

"What a fascinating mirror!" said Davlo. He reached for the linen shroud concealing all but one corner of a large looking glass set in a heavy gilt frame.

Fandulf zapped Davlo's hand with a small Lightning spark.

"Ow!" said Davlo, jerking back.

"A cursed mirror from Ravenheim," said Fandulf. "That is a looking glass you do not want to go through."

"Go through?" said Davlo. "But why would —"

"Don't. Touch. Anything." Fandulf did his flashing eyes trick again to show he meant it.

"Is everything cursed?" asked Grimmir.

"Assume it is," said Fandulf. "Now stick close and stop asking questions. We must find Joad."

"What would Joad be doing down here?" asked Fafnir.

"His job," said Yix.

Tuonetar scoffed. "What job has Joad got other than stinking up the kitchen cooking his godsawful cheese dip?"

“Hey, it’s good dip!” said Fafnir.

“Perhaps for caulking tiles,” said Tuonetar.

“Whatever the merits of Joad’s cheesy concoctions,” said Fandulf, “he is the appointed Keeper of the Forbidden Chamber of Forbidden Things. If the purple smoke that led us here means something has happened to him, then we may yet be in danger!”

10: OF FORBIDDEN THINGS

Fandulf led the others deeper into the Forbidden Chamber. Up in the highest shelves strange lights flickered and weird shapes danced. Odd bubbles of light popped in and out of existence.

“What is this Forbidden Chamber all about anyway?” asked Tuonetar.

“Forbidden Chamber of Forbidden things,” Fandulf corrected. “And I think its purpose should be obvious. This is where we store forbidden things.”

“And why are all these things forbidden?” asked Davlo.

“Moreover, why is this place kept secret from the Order?” demanded Grimmir.

“Did I not say no more questions?” asked Fandulf, waving his arm in exasperation. “I’m quite sure I did.”

“We may as well tell them,” said Yix.

Fandulf shook his head. “They may soon regret learning as much as they have already.”

“Why are you talking about us like we’re not here?” asked Tuonetar.

“Because you should not be here,” said Fandulf. He sighed. “But as you are, know that our Order has maintained a Forbidden Chamber of Forbidden Things since the earliest days. Here we store all dangerous items of Magick recovered by Wizards, confiscated by the King’s

army or turned in by concerned subjects.”

“But there is so much,” said Davlo.

Fandulf nodded. “We’ve been at it a long time. I quite imagine this is the largest single collection of Magick objects in the world. Almost everything here is a high-risk item best kept out of unsuitable hands: Special staves. Rings of power. Magick lamps and lanterns, be they green, genie-infested, or otherwise. Swords – singing, flaming, freezing, cursed, blessed, broken or otherwise. Assorted hats, monkey paws, talking fish. Even an M60.”

“What’s an M60?” asked Fafnir.

“Never you mind,” said Fandulf.

“And what else have you secreted here?” asked Grimmir. “What else have you kept from the Order?”

“Cosmic cubes. Weighted dice. Lost arks, grails, and shrouds. Hammers disguised as walking sticks. An unruly Mask and a very nasty puzzle box. All exceedingly dangerous should they get loose again in the world.”

“But what of these books and scrolls?” protested Davlo. He pointed at the nearby shelves laden with books, clay cylinders, stone tablets, and carefully arranged scrolls. “Surely they are no danger to anyone?”

Fandulf was aghast. “Some of the most dangerous and terrible things here are books! The *Necronomicon*, the *Big Book of Cheat Codes* and the *Tome of Fifty Gray Shades*, to name a few of the worst!”

“I never imagined so many Magick items existed,” said Tuonetar.

“Good!” said Fandulf. “We aim to keep it that way. Wizards imagining things never ends well. We keep all this contraband locked away because no one – and certainly no Wizard! – can be trusted with these things.”

“Does that include even you, the greatest Wizard of our Order?” asked Davlo.

Fandulf fixed Davlo with a stare. “I should be trusted least of all,” he said. “Indeed, it has been more than ten

years since last I set foot in this vault, lest I be tempted. None but Joad, the Keeper of the Forbidden Chamber, can enter at will, for only he holds the Master Key.”

“You have a key,” said Grimmir.

“I have a halfkey,” said Fandulf.

“And I the other,” said Professor Yix. “Only three Wizards at any time know of and have access to the Forbidden Chamber – the Keeper, the Headmaster, and the Senior Tutor. And only Joad, the Keeper, has a full key.”

“But why do you say Wizards are not to be trusted with Magick?” said Grimmir. “Magick is what we do.”

“I suppose you would have us use all these items for great and good purposes?” said Fandulf.

“Of course,” said Grimmir. “That is our Order’s mission. To advance Magick and to use Magick to make the world better.”

Fandulf turned to Fafnir. “Young Wizard, if I gave you that wicked-looking staff there, the one wrapped in strange fur and capped with the carving of a diabolical horned head, what would you do with it?”

“Me?” said Fafnir. “I ... I don’t know.”

“Answer truly.”

Fafnir looked left and right nervously. His companions gave him no aid. “Well, I guess I’d point it at a rock or tree or moose or something and see what happens.”

Fandulf nodded triumphantly. “Exactly! And if the staff then opened a portal through which, say, a howling horde of demented genocide gerbils poured forth to devour every living thing in Midgård, what then?”

“Uh ... would it?” asked Fafnir.

Fandulf shrugged. “You don’t know. And by the time you did know, it would be too late. That is my point. That is why we keep such things locked away.”

Grimmir scoffed. “But only a fool would pick up a strange staff and use it without first investigating its provenance and powers.”

“Have you met Fafnir?” said Tuonetar.

Fandulf sighed. “I have no doubt that is the procedure *you* would follow, Grimmir. But you are not the typical Wizard. Fafnir is.”

“Thanks!” said Fafnir.

Fandulf placed his hand on his chest. “Even I, Fandulf the Almost Wise, can succumb to the urge to use items of great Magick irresponsibly. Right now, the urge to grab a Staff of Anti-Aircraft Fire and blast a flock of crows from the sky is almost overwhelming me.”

“That would be so cool!” said Fafnir.

“It would indeed,” agreed Fandulf.

“What’s anti-aircraft fire?” asked Fafnir.

“Never mind,” said Fandulf. “The point is, we dare not allow Wizards unsupervised access to these artifacts. Chaos and catastrophe would come of it. Along with far too many self-inflicted injuries, much ‘accidental’ exploding of friends, and excessive damage to property and livestock.”

“Wizards manage all that anyway,” said Grimmir.

“I agree,” said Davlo. “Surely with proper supervision this collection could be used to better the world rather than rotting in storage.”

“No,” said Fandulf. “We tried that. In the early days of the Order the rule was finders-keepers. But that led to insane competition between Wizards to have the biggest, loudest, most gaudy, most destructive hardware – and then to show off by using it, even when it wasn’t needed.”

“Yeah!” said Fafnir.

Everyone stared at him.

“I mean ... how unfortunate,” said Fafnir.

Fandulf sighed. “Thus we require Wizards to hand over any Magick items they may acquire in the course of a mission or quest. It all comes here, to be safely tucked away. But what is this!”

Fandulf stopped short and bent to study the floor. The flagstones beneath his feet were discolored – stained with a long, streaked smear of fresh cheese dip!

11: DIPPED IN DEATH

The Wizards followed the seasoned-to-taste trail of melted cheese (flavored with sliced peppers, a dash of vinegar, a shot of beer, a pinch of salt and various unidentified herbs and spices). The smeary mess wound away from the main processional, around one of the pillars and through the stacks.

“Joad is rarely so sloppy with food,” said Fandulf. “I fear the worst.”

“I wish we had crackers,” said Fafnir.

“You would eat dip from the floor?” said Tuonetar.

Fafnir nodded enthusiastically.

“Hopeless,” said Tuonetar.

“Quiet!” commanded Fandulf. “I hear the crackle of a fire. This way!”

An arched doorway led to a cozy little chamber furnished with a desk and stool, an overstuffed chair and a side table – all overturned or knocked askew. Empty bookshelves and cubbyholes lined the walls. A pile of blackened books and shriveled scrolls filled an open furnace set in the far wall. The devouring flames crackled away, hungrily consuming their feast of burnables.

“Alas, poor Joad!” said Professor Yix.

Joad lay on his back in the center of the room, plainly dead. His limbs were sprawled at wide angles from his

body. His robe was singed and stained with vital fluids. His head was strangely misshapen beneath the fold of his hood, as if it had been violently bashed in. The floor surrounding the corpse was smeared with broad lines and strange squiggles of Joad's famous cheese dip.

"What a waste," said Fafnir.

"Did Joad do all this?" asked Grimmir.

"Multiple sword wounds, cracked head and severe burns?" said Fandulf. "I think it unlikely."

"I meant the markings on the floor," said Grimmir. "That is writing."

"His fingers are covered in cheese," observed Davlo.

Fandulf turned to Yix. "Can we Resurrect him?"

Yix shook her head. "He's too long gone. What can all this mean?"

"Three things," said Fandulf. "One, Joad was murdered. Two, he knew his killer. And, three, his killer was a Wizard!"

"You can tell all that from squiggles of cheese?" asked Tuonetar.

Fandulf nodded. "These drizzles are a message composed in the only medium Joad had available – his own cheese dip."

"My gods," said Fafnir.

"But it doesn't say anything!" said Tuonetar.

"Perhaps Joad was disoriented due to his massive and soon-to-be-fatal head injury," said Fandulf. "He wrote in reverse."

"Mirror writing!" said Yix. "Yes, it was quite the fad when we were young!" She squinted. "Now that you mention it, that does look a bit like Joad's atrocious scrawl. Though with cheese it is hard to tell."

"There are paper and ink on his desk," said Fafnir. "Why not write with that?"

"Consider his injuries," said Fandulf. "Only the bowl of cheese dip from this side table was within Joad's reach, poor fellow."

Grimnir studied the cheese stains splattered across the flagstones. "I can read it. The first line is 'I was murdered'."

"Exactly," said Fandulf.

"Next is 'My killer was the Wizard—'. But the last word is a blob. Maybe an *A* or *M* at the start there. The rest is too smudged to read."

Fandulf nodded. "Very good! It takes a sharp eye and a keen mind to read mirror writing without a mirror."

"Still looks like squiggles to me," said Fafnir.

"Proving the point," said Tuonetar.

"But how could anyone have killed him if Joad had the only key?" asked Davlo.

"The only full key," said Tuonetar, eyeing Fandulf and Yix.

The two senior Wizards exchanged a knowing – perhaps, guilty? – look.

"Tuonetar is quite correct," said Fandulf.

"Exactly what you would say if – uh, I am?" said Tuonetar.

"Obviously," said Fandulf. "Only Yix and I working together had the means to enter the Forbidden Chamber."

"Ah ... so ... are you saying you two killed Joad?"

"We did not," said Fandulf.

"Can you prove that?" said Grimnir.

"Of course not," said Fandulf. "But if we had conspired to kill Joad, then certainly Professor Yix would not have been so foolish as to bring you four here to discover the crime."

"True enough," said Davlo.

"Could someone have borrowed your halfkeys?" asked Grimnir.

"Impossible," said Yix. "They are on our person at all times."

"Then Joad died in a locked room, with no way in or out," said Davlo. "A most perplexing mystery."

"A mystery we must solve," said Fandulf. "Before the killer kills again!"

12: THE CONVINCING CODE

“Had Joad any enemies?” asked Davlo.

Yix glanced at Fandulf, who made no response. “None living,” she said.

“Quite correct,” said Fandulf. “Between his Keeper duties and his devotion to snacking, Joad had no time for making enemies.”

“If the motive was not personal, Joad’s death may be related to his role as secret custodian of this enormous collection of Magick artifacts,” said Davlo.

“That does seem an angle worth pursuing,” agreed Fandulf.

“You said no Wizard can be trusted with these things,” said Grimmir. “Why trust Joad as their Keeper?”

Fandulf paced across the room, scanning its contents as he spoke. “Joad would never play with a strange staff, peruse a book of unknown magicks, nor open a Can of Doom just to see what happens.”

“How can you be sure?” persisted Grimmir.

“Because Joad was the most utterly unimaginative and least curious Wizard I have ever known.”

“This is true,” said Yix. “He was last in our class. He never did the assigned reading, much less devour every tome in the library as you are wont to do, Grimmir.”

Fandulf nodded. “Joad always cared more for snacks than spells.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” said Fafnir.

“The Keeper is responsible for tending the collection, recording new acquisitions, and occasional light dusting.” Fandulf ran his finger along the edge of an empty shelf, scooping up a fluffy fringe of grit and grime. “Which I see Joad has neglected.”

“He was the perfect Wizard for the job,” said Yix.

“But wouldn’t a non-Wizard be even better?” asked Tuonetar.

“An orangutan would be better!” said Fandulf.

“An orangutan did in fact hold the job before Joad,” said Yix.

Fandulf sighed. “An unfortunate loss.”

“What happened to the orangutan?” asked Tuonetar.

Yix shook her head. “He got a better offer. Managing a library somewhere.”

“Let us speak no more of that,” said Fandulf.

Careful not to disturb anything, Grimnir circled Joad’s body, scrutinizing every cheesy speck and blot on the floor around him. He knelt on Joad’s right. “There is more to the message here.”

Fandulf approached and read over Grimnir’s shoulder. “The motive for Joad’s death is clear,” he said.

“What does it say?” asked Fafnir.

Grimnir pointed out the words as he read aloud. “It says ‘The Wizard Somebody’ – the name is blotted out – ‘stole the Something of Somesuch.’”

“What’s the Something of Somesuch?” asked Tuonetar.

“Not an exact quote,” admitted Grimnir. “The actual words are illegible. But the meaning is clear.”

“Not to me, it isn’t,” said Fafnir.

“Air is not clear enough for you,” said Tuonetar. “The killer stole something from this dangerous pile of Magick.”

“We may surmise Joad surprised the thief,” said Fandulf. “There was a struggle. Joad lost. He was left for dead while the killer escaped.”

“But Joad was not dead,” said Davlo.

Fandulf nodded sadly. “He lived long enough to write this message – and perhaps to activate the purple smoke to summon help.”

“We really should have installed an alarm,” said Yix.

“Hindsight is but foresight in a mirror,” said Fandulf. “Be it so, we have Joad’s dying message. Unfortunately, cheese dip is not the ideal medium, so we lack a few vital details.”

“Such as who did it,” said Grimmir.

“And what was stolen,” said Davlo.

“But figuring out what was stolen should be simple!” said Tuonetar. “We need only check the items in the vault against Joad’s list. Whatever is listed but missing is what the killer took.”

Fandulf shook his head. “As you see, the shelves are empty and the furnace is full.”

“Oh,” said Tuonetar. “And this is where Joad kept the inventory lists?”

“It was,” said Fandulf. “We shall have to investigate the hard way. Yix, take the students and search the vault. I will see what else I can learn here in the study.”

“Come, students!” said Yix. Davlo, Tuonetar and Fafnir followed her out the door.

Grimmir held back.

“A word with you, Master Fandulf.”

“Yes, Grimmir?”

“There is yet another clue here, as I read the cheese.”

Fandulf sighed. “I know.”

13: SPECULATIVE ELEMENTS

“These dribbles below Joad’s feet and above his head,” said Grimmir, pointing. “Do you recognize them?”

Fandulf nodded. “They are the symbols of the Eight Elements, as represented in the Old Runes.” He studied Grimmir intently. “You know the Old Runes? Yes, of course you do.”

Grimmir shrugged. “How else to read the old texts? But why did Joad use his dying moments to scribe such symbols?”

“We shall never know,” said Fandulf. “Maybe he passed the time doodling while he waited to die. The mind can play strange tricks as it fades.”

“Perhaps,” said Grimmir. “But why then, did he draw this?” Grimmir pointed to a peculiar patch of cheese dip between Joad’s knees. From a certain angle, it looked like a horned octopus wrestling a hedgehog.

“A meaningless spatter,” said Fandulf.

“I have seen it before,” said Grimmir.

“Have you now?” said Fandulf warily.

“It represents the Ninth Element.”

Fandulf frowned. “The Ninth Element is a fantasy.”

“A theory,” insisted Grimmir. “A theory stating—”

Fandulf waved his hand impatiently. “I am familiar with these speculations. A so-called God Element that binds and

unifies the eight known elements. That penetrates us, surrounds us, and holds the multiverse together. It doesn't exist."

Grimnir shook his head. "I have read—"

"You have read the guesses of fools and the ravings of madmen!" Fandulf rapped his staff against the floor. "Grimnir, like all exceptionally bright young Wizards you are susceptible to believing there must be hidden realms of knowledge visible only to one so brilliant as yourself. You imagine the world is made of riddles set for you, and you alone, to solve."

Grimnir stiffened. "I seek truth," he said.

Fandulf sighed. "There is truth and there is truth. You may someday expand the boundaries of known Magick – I have no doubt of it. But don't waste your gifts chasing after phantoms like the Ninth Element. That way lies madness and obscurity. Do you want to end up like Lunder the Drooling? Or Udo the Useless?"

"I have never heard of them."

Fandulf leaned forward in triumph. "Exactly! They were brilliant Wizards who squandered their lives chasing the Ninth Element and fading away into obscurity."

"Did they leave behind any writings?" asked Grimnir.

"I should hope not!" snapped Fandulf. He pointed at the furnace. "Or, if so, I hope their mad scribbles were consigned to fire long ago." He shook his head. "What you see here are random dribbles, no more."

"Perhaps the killer stole something relating to the Ninth Element," Grimnir persisted.

"As there is no Ninth Element, that would be impossible," said Fandulf.

A new thought occurred to Grimnir. "These marks may not concern the theft. Joad knew he was dying. Maybe he wanted to pass on what he knew about the Ninth Element."

"Joad knew nothing about the Ninth Element," said Fandulf irritably.

Grimnir pointed to the rune on the floor. “He knew its symbol.”

Fandulf started to snap a reply. He caught himself and paused, thoughtful. “You do have a point.”

Grimnir knelt to touch the cheesy symbol. “A peculiar last thought for one so incurious as Joad, wouldn’t you say?”

“Perhaps,” said Fandulf. “But this doesn’t help us catch his killer. Right now, we must—”

Fandulf was interrupted by a flash of lightning, the boom of a thunderbolt – and a scream of pain from somewhere in the Forbidden Chamber!

14: PURPLE HAZARD

While Fandulf and Grinnir discussed the Ninth Element, the other Wizards made their way back to the central aisle that bisected the Forbidden Chamber. There, Professor Yix divided them into teams.

“Tuonetar and Fafnir, search from here back to the entrance,” she said, pointing in that direction. “Davlo and I will investigate the deeper recesses of the vault.”

Tuonetar nodded. “What shall we look for?”

“Any sign of the intruder,” said Yix. “Note anything that looks out of place.”

“How would we know?” protested Tuonetar. “This place is a mess!”

“Then look for any place the dust and cobwebs are disturbed,” said Yix. “But remember – touch nothing!”

“Don’t worry,” said Tuonetar. “Come on, Faf.”

Tuonetar and Fafnir disappeared into the stacks.

Yix walked toward the rear of the Forbidden Chamber. “Davlo, we will start at the far wall and work our way back to this point.”

“Most sensible!” said Davlo, matching her pace.

“The oldest relics are in the back,” said Yix as they walked briskly. “Or at least those that were discovered the earliest and have been here the longest. The shelves were filled back to front, except to the extent Joad has tried to

organize things more logically – which is to say, not very much!”

“The oldest artifacts are surely the most powerful,” said Davlo.

“Except when they are not,” said Yix.

“What do you mean?” asked Davlo. “The ancients had much craft since lost to us.”

“True,” said Yix. “And to be sure, a well-seasoned staff is much to be preferred to a new one, which is apt to be buggy and badly tuned. But there is such a thing as progress, Davlo. The ancients didn’t know everything!”

“Ah,” said Davlo.

“And here we are!” said Professor Yix.

The wall at the rear of the Forbidden Chamber was left unfinished, being the natural stone of the vault from which the vault was excavated so long ago. It was a face of dark, uneven, sharp-edged basalt glittering with flecks and streaks of quartz. The ten or twelve rows of shelves and cabinets to either side of the main aisle all ended about an arm’s length shy of this wall, leaving a narrow gap that traversed the width of the vault.

“Let us first peer down each row and see what we may,” said Professor Yix. “You go left. I’ll go right.”

Davlo nodded and started along the back wall, holding his staff high. He shone a beam of staffglow down each row as he passed. There was thick dust on the floor and thicker tangles of cobwebs strung between the shelves. No one had come this way in quite some time.

He had inspected eight rows when, from across the chamber, Professor Yix’s voice rang out. “You there! Halt!”

Davlo whirled and saw Yix dart between two shelves. Then a tremendous flash of elemental Lightning lit every eerie corner of the Forbidden Chamber.

“Yearggggh!” cried Yix.

Davlo sprinted to the professor’s aid.

A rapid strobe of death beams and fireballs flashed from

among the shelves. Lightning crashed. Clouds of steam rose to the high spaces of the vault. A Magick duel was underway.

“The killer is still here!” called Yix. “But you shall not escape!”

“Fool!” replied a distorted voice. “You shall not hinder me!”

Another exchange of spells followed. Professor Yix backed into view. A shimmering Shield hovered before her from which ebon blasts of Death and blue-white strokes of Lightning rebounded.

“Davlo, circle behind!” shouted Yix before charging back up the row behind a barrage of Ice Boulders.

Davlo turned right to sprint along a narrow aisle parallel to where Yix and the intruder battled. About twenty paces ahead was a gap between the long shelf units where Davlo could cross and get behind the intruder.

Davlo was halfway to the gap when a Grim Bolt of Death hit the ceiling and dislodged a massive chunk of stone that crashed down between the shelves. Davlo jumped back to avoid being crushed, but the huge wedge of stone blocked his way.

Undeterred, he bounded atop the obstacle with a prodigious leap. A second stupendous jump brought him to the top of the shelves. From there he leapt across the intervening aisle to the top of the next shelf, and then again, to find himself standing above and behind Yix’s foe, who wore gold-trimmed Wizard robes of wine-dark purple.

“Now I have you!” said Davlo.

“Not quite,” said the Purple Wizard, without even bothering to turn around. The foot of the intruder’s staff struck the floor.

RUUUUUMMMBBLE! KER-OOOOM!

The Forbidden Chamber shuddered, floor to ceiling, with a deep grinding rumble that Davlo felt in his bones.

An earthquake!

Davlo flapped his arms desperately to keep his balance on the edge of the swaying cabinet. The Purple Wizard, seemingly unaffected, assaulted an unsteady Professor Yix with a salvo of hot, sizzling Flame Stones. Yix repelled the attack with a hastily raised Earth Wall, sending stony missiles ricocheting in every direction. One hot rock the size of a goose egg came straight at Davlo. He dodged it at the cost of losing his footing and tumbled to the floor.

Fortunately, Davlo was unusually nimble for a Wizard and managed a stylish three-point landing while retaining his staff. He landed behind the Purple Wizard, who was intent on the struggle with Professor Yix.

A glowing Shield against Yix's Lightning spell surrounded the Purple Wizard. Davlo launched a countering Earth-Fire blast, hoping to overwhelm the intruder's defenses.

He took careful aim and loosed his spell.

At that moment, by means of Teleport, Fandulf appeared between Davlo and the Purple Wizard.

"Villain!" shouted Fandulf. "You are—"

FWOOOOOSH!

Whatever Fandulf meant to add was lost as Davlo's fiery missile hit him from behind. The headmaster of the Order of Magick did a face plant to the floor.

"Sorry, Master Fandulf!"

"You will all be sorry!" declared the Purple Wizard, again rapping staff to floor.

The second earthquake was stronger than the first. It set all the furnishings of the chamber rocking and swaying anew. Shelves collapsed, dumping their contents to the floor. Cabinets flew open, releasing scrolls, potions in stoppered bottles, a pile of adorable pink fluff balls, necromantic soul jars, late model flying brooms, crystal orbs, and a ghastly collection of shrunken heads.

Amid this distraction, the Purple Wizard detonated a sun-bright Flaming Death Sphere that drove Yix and Davlo

back, singed Fandulf's back, and set shelving ablaze. With frightful swiftness, the flames reached a pile of colorful tubes and cylinders on a nearby shelf marked CAUTION: FIREWORKS. These containers bore colorful names such as Five-Color Rocket Storm, Nova Plasma Waterfall, Prancing Sky Tiger and M18A1: FRONT TOWARD ENEMY.

Questing tongues of flame reached this assortment of "fireworks":

WHA-BOOM! KER-POW!

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

WHOOOMP! FIZZZZ-BAM!

Rockets, streamers and screamers launched themselves into the air, trailing lines of white smoke across the Forbidden Chamber. The tubular missiles rebounded off the ceiling, knocked against the lanterns, glanced off pillars, and crashed into shelves and cabinets while letting off a cacophony of screams, screeches, whirs and deafening booms. The noise echoed again and again through the vault like thunder in a jar. Blinding bursts of red, white, blue, gold, green and purple bloomed in the air like giant flowers. The biggest bursts formed shimmering outlines traced in sparks: a dragon, two tigers, Jólnir in his sled, strange round-bodied snow beings and other fanciful figures meant to be painted across an evening sky to the delight of an admiring crowd below. The effect was much different in the confines of the Forbidden Chamber – like having a work gang of dwarves pound on your ear drums with huge hammers while a swarm of rainbow fairies hopped up on pixie powder tried to fly straight through your eyeballs and out the back of your skull.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

15: HANDLE WITH CARE

The earthquake and explosives toppled all the nearest shelves, sending them crashing against other shelves and yet more shelves, each knocking over the next like giant dominos. Ages worth of Magick artifacts gathered by the Order crashed violently to the unyielding stone floor of the Forbidden Chamber.

Magick items, as a rule, require careful handling. Dashing thousands of them to the floor all at once brought most alarming consequences:

A glass and copper Staff of Lightning cracked and released a dozen thunderbolts at once. One of these bolts upset a decanter holding Universal Solvent, which spilled out to dissolve its way toward the center of the world, but not before eating through one corner of a rune-bound iron chest that had long imprisoned the dreadful Hand of Necva.

This mummified appendage of a dread necromancer of the Elder Days poked one shriveled finger through the hole, then another, and began to scratch and claw its way free, rending the un-runed iron like silk.

The Hand's thrashing set the iron box bouncing against the legendary Barrel of Monkeys, which rolled down the incline of a broken shelf. The boisterous barrel crushed a collection of delicate jade figurines of animals. These, when

broken, summoned a menagerie of full-sized jade creatures: elephant, lion, goat, stallion, giant scorpion and bear.

The animals at once scattered, seeking enemies to trample, maul or sting. As the jade goat passed by, its cloven hoof struck the lid of the monkey barrel, which popped off. Out flew a cloud of winged simians wearing gaudy quilted jackets and absurd little round caps. (How they got all those monkeys in that tiny little barrel, we will never know.)

Each of the screeching monkeys bore an odd sort of triggered staff called a “Tommy Gun”. The whole pack took to the air and with a loud **BRAKA-BRAKA-BRAKA** opened fire at anything that moved below, and most things that didn’t. Chips of stone went flying off the jade lion as the monkeys gunned it down. Its body cracked and crumbled into rocky rubble. Fortunately, its demise did not summon an even bigger jade lion.

Two howling monkeys raked their fire across a tilted shelf of vials and bottles, releasing Magick potions and oils and powders and gases that most definitely should *not* be mixed. The liquids ran together to form bubbling, sparking, fume-spewing multi-colored puddles. The essences of opposing elements met in this bubbling stew, triggering more explosions and sending arcs of Fire, flumes of toxic Water and jets of scalding Steam hurtling high into the air.

One of the huge lanterns above, set swinging by the earthquake, dislodged from its mooring and fell with a titanic crash. The ball of light it contained flew apart like the yolk of an egg hurled against a brick wall, sticking to whatever it struck. Where the luminous goop hit the spreading potion puddle, geysers of blue fire erupted and did not subside.

Free of its prison, the Hand of Necva hurled Necrotic Balls of Death at the monkeys. Lacking eyes, the Hand’s aim was iffy at best, but the five monkeys it hit suffered a necromantic transformation. Their flesh went putrid and

their fur fell off in clumps. The dead-eyed zombie monkeys turned against their furry comrades. A wild aerial monkey-on-monkey gun battle ensued.

A stray burst of bullets opened the catch on a weirdly carved cabinet that flew open to reveal the implacable Face of Awful Truth, before whose terrible gaze no false thing can endure. Unfortunately, the first thing its terrible gaze fell upon was the treacherous Mirror of Tieded, which had fallen askew against a nearby pillar. This lying looking glass revealed nothing but false images. (Most excellent if you're not the fairest in the land but want to convince yourself you are. Not so useful if you want to see if there is something stuck between your teeth.) The Mirror reflected the Face's shining beams of Awful Truth back as the worst sort of Deception. The feedback opened a Class Five Derrida Loop that propagated intense Waves of Doubt across the multiverse, thus triggering epistemic crises and severe outbreaks of post-modernism in several neighboring worlds.

The disturbance also awakened the Screaming Skull of Skornn, a misshapen and horned head bone that flew from its soundproof urn keening a wild madness-inducing cry of penultimate terror. Skornn, as any scholar of the macabre well knows, was once the disciple and lieutenant of Necva. After the usual twists and turns of betrayal, revenge, being entombed alive but unable to die, and bargains with dark powers, nothing was left of Skornn but an angry and insane undead skull. (Very potent for necromantic rituals, so long as you remember to wear earplugs to block its infernal screeching.)

The Hand of Necva gave the Skull of Skornn the finger of contempt and their battle was on. The telekinetic Skull hurled every enchanted knife, sword, axe and staff within range of its power at the Hand, which responded by sending its undead monkey minions to intercept Skornn's flying head.

While these events unfolded, more than a dozen equally improbable chain reactions worked themselves out all across the Forbidden Chamber. Magick gauntlets battled cursed axes. Gelatinous tentacles squirmed out of ruptured sarcophagi. Mutually exclusive prophecies tried to shout each other down. A hellpit opened from which a giant scaly claw emerged. Rival swords of legendary pedigree clashed. A plague of locusts appeared. A decadent deck of Tarot cards came to life to brawl with the pieces of an enchanted chess set. Magick staves, blades, crowns, cloaks and other slipped, fell, or flew into the ever-expanding pool of potion residue, liquid lantern light and elemental discharge above which small burning whirlwinds of faltine vapors twisted and surged. As these items broke, melted, shattered or exploded, they added their own Magick energies to the growing conflagration.

Fandulf sat up, rubbed his head, and took in the chaos all around him. He sighed the sad sigh of the almost wise. "This is why Wizards can't have nice things."

16: GIVE ME SHELTER

“What should we do, Tuonetar?”

Fafnir was starting to panic. Tuonetar recognized the signs. He held it together in the Dangerous Room, but this new mess was too much, too soon for poor Faf. She grabbed him and shook him.

“Hold it together, Faf! We’ll think of something.”

“I’m not such a good thinker.”

“I meant I would think of something.”

Fafnir and Tuonetar did not split up to search for clues. Fafnir thought the Forbidden Chamber was too spooky to wander alone. Tuonetar agreed, though what she said aloud was something about sticking close to keep Fafnir out of trouble. They were browsing a section of shelves devoted to curious square tablets marked with fruit runes when Yix’s battle with the Purple Wizard erupted at the other end of the vault.

The sudden flashes, bangs and booms of Magick combat startled them. The first earthquake knocked them to the floor. The second tremor knocked them down again and toppled the two nearest shelves. These might have crushed the Wizards, but fortuitously fell against each other in an inverted V, forming a crude shelter. Stacks of square tablets slid free and rained down on the pair. Fortunately, the tablets were lightweight and elegantly designed with

rounded corners, so no one lost an eye.

Then the fireworks started.

One particular bottle rocket, of the Screaming Streamer variety, took an improbable trajectory across the vault. Trailing orange smoke, it wailed into the air, ricocheted off a pillar, rebounded against a swinging lantern, struck the floor, then skipped up and flew straight into the gap where Fafnir and Tuonetar huddled.

Whether Fafnir valiantly pushed Tuonetar out of the way, stumbled against her while trying to save himself, or simply tripped is unclear. Whatever version you choose to believe, the rocket hit Fafnir in the head and exploded in a burst of light, sound and heat that left him stunned, deafened, and seeing orange starbursts.

Tuonetar, shielded from the blast by her companion's body, picked herself up from the floor and found Fafnir slumped against the shelf behind him like a limp, discarded scarecrow in need of fresh straw.

"Faf! Faf! Are you all right? Speak, Faf!"

Fafnir's head lolled to the left. Tuonetar shook him. His head flopped to the right.

"Stay with me, Faf!" Tuonetar cast a healing spell. There was a burst of emerald Life glow and Fafnir jolted into consciousness.

"Omigodmyheadexplodedwherearemybrains!" shouted Fafnir.

Tuonetar slapped him. "Make sense, Faf!"

"What?" said Fafnir.

"You're alive. I was worried for a moment there."

"What?" said Fafnir.

"Are you deaf?" said Tuonetar.

"What?" said Fafnir.

"I'll take that as a yes. Well, it should wear off in a moment."

"I'm alive!" said Fafnir, far too loudly.

"Let's see if we can stay that way!" shouted Tuonetar.

"Yes, please!" said Fafnir.

“The explosions seem to be done,” said Tuonetar. “I’ll take a look and – yipe!”

Tuonetar jumped back to avoid being trampled by an enormous jade elephant. (Not that she would have called it by that name, having never seen an elephant.) The creature charged on by, smashing its way through overturned shelves.

“This is not good,” said Tuonetar.

“What was *that*?” shouted Fafnir.

“Some sort of giant four-legged stone golem with a bizarre flailing tentacle on its face!” said Tuonetar. “Something has gone badly wrong here in the Forbidden chamber!”

“Do you think so?” said Fafnir.

A winged monkey flew by and raked their position with bullets that chewed up wooden shelves and sent splinters flying.

“Yes, I definitely think so,” said Tuonetar.

This was the point at which Fafnir started to lose it. Tuonetar gave him another shake. “I’ll think of something, Faf. Don’t worry!”

She peeked out and caught a glimpse of the dogfight between monkeys living and unliving, as well as the growing storm of Magick and toxic fumes above the lake of spilled potions.

Tuonetar made a decision. “We’ll try to make it back to the door and go for help.”

“What about the others?” said Fafnir.

“I’m sure Fandulf the Great can take care of himself,” said Tuonetar. “And Professor Yix can go hang after locking us in that Dangerous Room of hers.”

“I meant Davlo and Grimmir,” said Fafnir.

Tuonetar shook her head. “They’re with Yix and the headmaster, Faf. We should go for help while we can. Things are getting bad in here. Are you with me?”

“Sure.” Fafnir gulped hard. “Yes.”

Tuonetar gave him a reassuring punch to the shoulder. “Just Shield up and follow me. We’ll head for the side wall, away from whatever is bubbling and spewing over there, and work our way back to the front door.”

Tuonetar dashed out of their hidey-hole with Fafnir behind her.

The Screaming Skull of Skornn banked around a pile of debris and flew right at them, with two flying zombie monkeys in hot pursuit.

The Skull came face-to-hood with Tuonetar – and stopped, hovering before her.

The Skull screamed. Tuonetar screamed. Fafnir screamed.

The monkeys opened fire.

17: REAP THE WHIRLWIND

A chain of green Life Lightning sizzled through the air. The bolt jumped from monkey to monkey and then to the Skull of Skornn. It blasted the flying zombie monkeys to fine ash. Their Tommy Guns clattered to the floor followed by their ridiculous hats.

The Skull spun round and round in the air, spewing charnel vapors from its eerily glowing eye sockets. After a moment of this, the Skull righted itself and swooped away to again confront the Hand of Necva.

Tuonetar looked up to see their rescuer, a red-robed Wizard perched atop a mound of debris.

“Come with me if you want to live,” said Grimnir.

“We were going to go for help,” said Tuonetar.

Grimnir shook his head. “You’ll never make it. There is too much wild Magick loose. Dangerous beings have been loosed and summoned. All between us and the door.”

“Then what do we do?” said Tuonetar. “Just die?”

“Possibly,” said Grimnir. “But our chances improve if we find Davlo and the masters.”

“Sounds like a plan!” said Fafnir. “Er ... not that your plan wasn’t good too,” he added, giving Tuonetar a shrug.

“No matter,” said Tuonetar. “I’m sure Grimnir is right as usual.”

Tuonetar and Fafnir followed Grimnir back toward

Joad's study. Behind them, the front half of the Forbidden Chamber was lit with eerie flashes of power and scoured by supernatural winds that swirled noxious mists into twisters and swept up every loose object, all feeding the swelling storm of Magick.

"Ah! There you are!" said Fandulf, stepping out of the study when they arrived. He ushered them into the study, where Yix and Davlo waited. "Are all unhurt? Good! We have a serious problem."

The shattering crash of one of the great lanterns punctuated the headmaster's statement.

"I'll say!" said Fafnir.

"The killer has escaped," said Yix, shaking her head ruefully. She sat on Joad's easy chair, massaging a sprained ankle.

"The killer is still here?" said Tuonetar.

"No longer, unless well hidden, or crushed under a shelf," said Fandulf.

"As I nearly was," said Yix.

"But you weren't," snapped Fandulf. "Let's focus on the problem at hand. Our battle with the Purple Wizard – for lack of a proper name – made quite a mess of the Forbidden Chamber."

"Yes," said Grimnir. "The way out is blocked. All the Magick in this vault is at war with itself."

"An apt description," said Fandulf, nodding sadly. "I fear a Magick Maelstrom has formed. With so many items of power stored together there was always the slight possibility that such a meltdown could occur."

"We have to get out of here!" said Tuonetar.

"Impossible," said Yix.

"But you two can Teleport. You could—"

"Alas, no," said Fandulf. "Ancient wards around the Forbidden Chamber prevent Teleporting in or out. The vault would be quite insecure without them! What is more, the Maelstrom would disrupt any Teleport magick."

“But the Purple Wizard escaped,” said Davlo. “There must be a second door.”

“There is not meant to be,” said Fandulf. “And if there is, it is pointless to search for it.”

“Pointless!” said Tuonetar. “We must get out!”

“That would do us little good,” said Fandulf. “The Maelstrom grows by the minute. If not stopped, it could be our undoing.”

“What does that mean, ‘our undoing?’” asked Davlo.

“Exactly that,” said Fandulf. “Anything caught in the Maelstrom will be undone. Unmade. Pulled apart into its constituent elements. In theory, such a Maelstrom could undo all of Midgård. But at the very least, it will undo Aldrheim.”

“Then we had best stop it,” said Grimmir.

“But how?” asked Davlo. “It seems any spell we cast will only feed the storm.”

“Quite right,” said Fandulf. “Spells will not avail. But magicks may.”

“Jólnir’s jingling bells!” said Yix. “You mean to open a Vortex!”

Fandulf nodded gravely. “I must. It is our only hope.”

“What’s a Vortex?” asked Fafnir.

Fandulf waved his arms in a big circle, “Imagine that somewhere in the multiverse is a spare closet of infinite capacity. In simplest terms, a Vortex opens a doorway to this cosmic closet through which we may shove the Maelstrom and all the concentrated Magick of the vault that is feeding it.”

“Won’t that annoy whoever lives in the Vortex?” asked Fafnir.

“No one lives in the Vortex,” said Yix.

“Indeed not,” said Fandulf. “Absolutely no harm can come of dumping massive quantities of toxic Magick into the Vortex. Perfectly safe. Unless you get sucked into the Vortex yourself.”

“Yes, do avoid that,” said Yix. “For there is no way back.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” said Tuonetar.

18: VORTEX

The Maelstrom had grown bigger and stronger during the Wizards' brief conference. They emerged from Joad's study to find huge planks and timbers flying round and round, along with staves, swords, books and all other manner of treasures from the Forbidden Chamber's hoard. It was as if all the mighty fury of the North Wind had gotten itself trapped in a tool shed.

"Get behind me!" shouted Fandulf. "I will open the Vortex!"

At Yix's direction, the four students raised Shields and Earth barriers around the headmaster to protect him as he cast his magick. Fandulf recited an ancient incantation with practiced ease, not letting the dangerous conditions disrupt his concentration. He channeled the elements of Cold, Water, Death and Shield in a precise combination and knit them together to poke a hole in reality. This magick produced a small, pulsating purple and black sphere that hovered a foot or so above the ground in front of Fandulf. It appeared to contain an infinite depth that was both fascinating to the eye and horrifying to contemplate.

It pulled at the summoned walls of rock shielding Fandulf as if they were taffy, drawing out their substance and stretching them thin until they seemed to pour themselves into nothingness.

The Vortex got bigger.

Splinters of wood and shards of shattered pottery skittered across the floor toward the Vortex. The smaller bits leapt suddenly into the black ball of nothing as they came near, vanishing instantly. With each item consumed, the Vortex grew.

“Push everything you can into the Vortex while I steer it toward the heart of the Maelstrom!” said Fandulf.

The Wizards pointed their staffs and conjured telekinetic force to Push timbers and treasures toward the Vortex. The sphere devoured all brought within its pull. It quickly grew to the dimensions of a large moose.

“Good!” said Fandulf. “Feed it yet more!”

“But don’t get too close,” said Yix. “The Vortex will swallow you just as well – and the bigger it gets, the stronger it gets.”

“Devours everything around it and keeps getting bigger,” said Tuonetar. “How is the Vortex any less a menace than the Maelstrom?”

“I can control the Vortex,” said Fandulf. “More or less.”

The Vortex swelled up big as a cottage. Fandulf trembled as he fought to nudge the dark sphere across the vault. As if sensing a threat, the Maelstrom redoubled its raging blasts and furies. The risk of impalement by a storm-tossed Frost Sword or Spear of Troll-Slaying was high. A lead-bound spell book almost thwacked Davlo in the head. A big brass Bell of Doleful Tidings clipped Fafnir on the shoulder hard enough to spin him around. Grimnir ducked as a giant jade scorpion flew just over his head on its way into the Vortex.

The other Wizards continued to protect Fandulf, projecting Fire, Earth and Ice to bat away or obliterate any missile that flew toward the headmaster, lest his concentration be broken.

Fandulf moved the Vortex methodically around the Forbidden Chamber, sucking up as many loose Magick

items and as much debris as he could to give the omnivorous orb more heft before driving it into the epicenter of the Maelstrom. All the polychromatic vapors, clouds and fumes; the whirlwind of crazily spinning Magick artifacts; the various supernatural beings inadvertently released from their prisons – all vanished with a tremendous ***KA-BOOM!*** and a flash of blue-black light.

The Wizards all blinked – and saw that the Forbidden Chamber was now empty of Forbidden Things. The Vortex was gone, and the Maelstrom with it.

“It is finished,” said Fandulf. He slumped against his staff, exhausted. Davlo and Grimnir grasped his arms to support him. “Aldrheim is saved.” He sighed. “It is actually liberating to be rid of all that Magick clutter. We should have cleaned out this basement years ago.”

A groaning sound above their heads made everyone look up. They watched a crack two hands wide form in the curved ceiling far above.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have sent three support columns into the Vortex,” said Grimnir.

A huge section of the ceiling separated and crashed to the floor, forming a crater and sending up a cloud of choking dust.

“Ah,” said Fandulf. “There is a reason I did not become an architect.”

“We had best vacate the Forbidden Chamber now, lest it become our tomb,” said Yix.

“As to that,” said Davlo. “Behold!”

He pointed. In the back corner of the chamber stood an open door!

19: QUEST REQUEST

“How disappointing,” said Fandulf, as he studied the door. “This vault is meant to have but one way in or out. That is the whole point of a vault.”

“This is an ancient castle, full of secrets,” said Yix. “And full of things that shouldn’t be.”

“Indeed,” said Fandulf. “And this is a most cunningly wrought door, undetectable to the eye – unless left standing open. How long it has existed, I could not say.”

“At least we know how the Purple Wizard got in and out,” said Davlo.

Fandulf nodded. “A minor mystery solved. But the greater mystery is what the Purple Wizard came to steal. The Vortex eliminated any remaining clues to the intruder’s identity or purpose. We must therefore assume the thief stole an object of great power and that the whole world is in danger.”

“We don’t know that,” said Yix. “Perhaps the Purple Wizard took a trinket of less apocalyptic significance.”

Fandulf scoffed. “One does not go to the trouble of burgling the Forbidden Chamber – and killing Joad – to steal a Robe of Itching.”

“Never mind that!” said Tuonetar. “Can we get out this way? The roof will fall on us at any moment!”

“You can indeed go out this way,” said Fandulf. “In

fact, you must go this way, if you are to overtake the Purple Wizard.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asked Davlo.

“No,” said Fandulf. “If this vault collapses, it could cause every level above to give way and bring down Aldrheim. I mean that literally. It could bring the entire castle down here. Which would not be a good thing. Yix and I must remain here to shore up the foundations and make such temporary repairs as we can until we can get a proper mason down here.”

“I thought the very existence of the Forbidden Chamber was a secret that must be kept from all,” said Davlo.

“It won’t be much of a secret when every Wizard in the Order falls down here,” said Fandulf. “I fear we shall have to alter that rule.”

“And perhaps make better arrangements for storing Magick items in the future,” said Yix.

“Quite so,” said Fandulf. “In the meantime, I need one to four Wizards to pursue the Purple Wizard and I need them now. You four will do.”

“Don’t sound so confident,” said Tuonetar.

“I am confident you can handle the matter as well as any other four,” said Fandulf.

“They *are* my four best students,” said Yix.

“We’re your only four students left,” said Tuonetar.

“That also,” admitted Yix.

“We will not fail, Master Fandulf!” said Davlo.

“Yes,” added Grimnir. “We will do what must be done.”

“I’m in!” said Fafnir. “A real adventure!”

“What’s our other option?” asked Tuonetar.

“Options?” said Fandulf. “I am quite certain I did not speak of options.”

“What about food, and supplies and—” said Tuonetar.

“You are brave and resourceful Wizards!” said Fandulf. “You’ll manage.”

“But haven’t you something to give us an edge? A

special staff? Enhanced robes? Magick swords?”

“A short while ago I had a vault full of such things,” said Fandulf. He swept his arm to indicate the empty Forbidden Chamber. “Now, alas, I do not.”

“Nothing?” Tuonetar stamped her foot, as she did when her ire was up.

Fandulf took a step back and stumbled over a leather-bound book that had somehow escaped the Vortex. “Ah!” said Fandulf, stooping to pick it up. He studied the cover. “Perfect! Here you go – a new magick to help you on your quest. Study this as you go and you’ll master it in no time.” He presented the book to Tuonetar with a flourish.

Not entirely mollified, she accepted the book and glanced at the title. She frowned. “This is a treatise on Haste,” she said.

“Indeed!” said Fandulf. “A most useful magick. It will be of great service to you.”

“Grimnir already knows Haste,” protested Tuonetar.

“Does he?” said Fandulf.

“I do,” said Grimnir.

“Excellent!” said Fandulf. “Then he will be able to answer any questions you may have. Now off with you!”

“Could we at least have lunch first?” said Fafnir.

“Did you have a hearty breakfast?” asked Fandulf.

“Oh yes!” said Fafnir. He smacked his lips. “Sausage and hen’s eggs and honey and bread and—”

“Then lunch is a luxury you can ill afford.”

“Huh?”

“That means be on your way,” said Fandulf.

“Come, Fafnir,” said Davlo. “We will forage as we go. There are many edible roots and berries in the forest.”

“Roots and berries!” said Fafnir.

“Remember all you have learned,” said Professor Yix. “Trust in Magick to guide the way and bring you back again.”

“This will not end well,” said Tuonetar.

But she stuffed the *Book of Haste* in her bag anyway.

20: MAKING TRACKS

Entrusted with a vital mission that could spell doom for all the world if they failed, the four companions ventured into the dark tunnel beyond the secret door. They had not gone far when they heard the ***THUD-DOOM!*** of half the Forbidden Chamber's roof caving in. There was no turning back now.

A long twisting passageway led them to a cave mouth on the far side of the coastal hills upon which Aldrheim stood. From here, the four young Wizards continued their pursuit of the treacherous Purple Wizard. The fugitive's trail of footprints and discarded cough drop wrappers led them through the Disappointing Forest with its so-so scenery, past the scattered settlements on the other side of the wood, and up into the austere hill country inhabited by poor shepherds and prospectors (along with a small tribe or two of predatory Goblins).

I will not bore you with the details of various minor incidents involving a murderous inn keeper, a talking wolf, or a Fellowship of nine walkers who had missed their turn and needed directions. These were mere distractions from the definite purpose always uppermost in the minds of the four companions: they must catch the Purple Wizard, stop whatever bad thing said Wizard was up to, and recover the stolen Something of Something (whatever it was). Their goal could not have been more clear.

The four companions questioned all they met on the road, asking if their quarry had come that way. Many reported seeing the Purple Wizard heading south. So south the companions went. And a bit to the west.

Beyond the hills southwest of the Disappointing Forest were the vast rolling plains of the Undrawn Lands. The days became a week, the week became a fortnight. Encounters with other travelers became rare. The Wizards were now beyond the writ of the King in Havindr and definitely off the map.

“What a glorious vista!” said Davlo. The rising sun painted the clouds in the east with streaks of rose and purple. Davlo was inevitably the first of the four Wizards to be up and ready to begin the next day of pursuit. “It may have been from these very plains that mighty Havindr led his fearsome moose riders, with the Wizard Aldr at his side, to carve out the Kingdom of Midgård!”

“Nothing here but grass and bugs,” said Fafnir, still in his bedroll. He swatted a mosquito. “I’d move north too. At least we have a castle.”

“The castle wasn’t built then, blockhead,” said Tuonetar. She stretched her arms and yawned. “Not until later, when Aldr founded the Order.”

“Let’s be on our way,” said Grinnir. “I doubt the Purple Wizard is stopping to admire the view.”

The Unmapped Plains were neither trackless nor uninhabited, despite appearances. Nomadic tribes led their grazing herds across the region, following the cycle of the seasons. Rough roads that were truly no more than the ruts of wagon wheels dignified with the name “road” served as an infrequently used trade route to distant lands. Meeting no wayfarers to question, the companions tracked the Purple Wizard like hunters stalking game.

Fortunately, Grinnir was surprisingly good at this. With an eagle’s eye he spotted faint tracks, bent stalks of grass and other signs of which way the Purple Wizard went. By

all indications, their prey was still on foot, still a day ahead of them, and still going south.

It was early afternoon when the Wizards paused while Grinnir again knelt down to read the signs. The others gathered around to watch him study a small depression in the dust which Grinnir pronounced to be a mark made by the Purple Wizard's staff. So intent were the four on this business they failed to notice that they had been surrounded by a troop of skin-clad moose riders, with arrows nocked and bows drawn!

21: GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

“We will go with you in peace!” said Davlo, raising his hands. At his insistent nod, the other Wizards followed Davlo’s lead. The riders conferred among themselves in a language that was not the Wizards’ Gibberish, though it had some similarities. After a brief discussion they lowered their bows and gestured for the Wizards to follow them.

“Davlo, we can take them,” said Tuonetar.

“No doubt,” said Davlo. “But we are strangers in this land. Better to befriend these barbarians than to start a fight for no reason.”

The patrol escorted the four Wizards to their encampment, which lay on the other side of a low, rolling line of hills.

Tuonetar gave a whistle of surprise. “Wow. Good call, Davlo.”

A sea of colorful tents, drab huts, psychedelic yurts, and painted teepees occupied the broad valley below. Thousands of barbarians busied themselves at many tasks. Some were cooking, cleaning, mending, tending moose and sheep, or performing other chores. Many others gathered in drum circles to beat out rhythms, sing, chant and dance. Here and there were troupes of acrobats, tumbling and flipping in the air to amuse their fellows. Another group did their tricks on the backs of swiftly galloping moose. In

another part of the camp, the crowd was cheering on the contestants in a footrace.

“Wow, that’s a lot of barbarians!” said Fafnir.

“And from many tribes,” said Davlo. “Our escorts are from the Moose Clan, native to this region. Their yurts are adorned with antlers. But on the far side of the camp, there, flies the Bone Banner of the Dog Tribe, hereditary enemies of the Moose people. And there are many other clans and tribes I do not recognize. This is a most unusual gathering.”

“Perhaps the Purple Wizard brought them together as an army of conquest,” said Grimmir.

“We shall soon know,” said Davlo.

The moose scouts led them down a grassy slope and into the camp. Few in the camp gave the Wizards and their escorts more than a passing glance before returning to their own tasks. Several wide-eyed children and a scruffy yellow dog followed them for a bit. The children giggled and pointed at the Wizards until one of the scouts shooed them away.

“Look!” said Fafnir. “Pie!”

They had reached a long table laden with pies. Blackberry pie by the smell, and fresh. Seated on a bench at the table were two barbarians of enormous girth. From their garb, it was evident they represented different tribes. But they were joined in a common purpose – eating as many pies as possible! Each contestant’s face was smeared with fruit filling and crumbs of crust as they jammed one fat wedge of pie after another into their maws. The crowd gathered around the table cheered them on, hooting, shouting and stomping their feet. Servants resupplied the table from a nearby oven, ensuring that each eater had at least two pies within his reach at all times.

The contest was near its climax. The two competitors were all that remained of more than a dozen who sat down with them. A couple of the dropouts lay on the ground nearby, moaning and rubbing their bellies.

The Wizards stopped to watch. Without complaint, the scouts paused too.

The contestant on the left wore a necklace of shells and shark teeth, emblems of the Sea People. Judging from the chanting supporters, this was Kor. Kor finished off a pie. He reached for the next pie, lifted it toward his face, then faltered. The pie slipped from his fingers, landing in his lap with a wet smack. Kor's chin vibrated. His shoulders shook. His eyes rolled back in his head, displaying the whites.

"I know that look," said Tuonetar, shooting a sidelong glance at Fafnir.

"He's gonna blow!" said Fafnir.

Kor's voluminous belly quivered. His head tilted back. Then he made a sound like a breaching whale as he ejected a standing column of liquefied blackberry pie four feet straight up. The arc of badly chewed and barely digested pie paste hung shimmering in the air for several seconds, like the northern lights rendered in fruit. Then the fountain of pie collapsed back onto Kor's head and upper body as he rolled backward off the bench and passed out.

"Vogern! Vogern! Vogern!" chanted the crowd, as the judges proclaimed the other eater the winner. Vogern was of a size with her defeated foe. Her attire proclaimed she was of the Bear Clan. A jubilant band of her fellow tribe members mobbed her in celebration.

"Awesome!" said Fafnir.

"Disgusting," said Tuonetar. "Eating for sport? That's just wrong."

The lead scout indicated it was time to move on. Their destination was but a short distance away – a grand council yurt bedecked with many ribbons and trophies and guarded by a dozen spears. Who awaited them inside? The Purple Wizard?

Or something far worse?

22: NIM-YAP

The scouts pulled back the tent flaps and gestured for the Wizards to enter. Davlo went first, followed by the others. Their escorts remained outside.

The yurt was dimly lit by smoky butterfat lanterns. The interior was carpeted with thick rugs and the walls hung with silks, furs, and colorful images of an obscure rock god painted on black velvet. A bed of hot coals glowed in the middle of the pavilion, sending a thin stream of bluish smoke up through an opening above. Seated around the pit on plush cushions were at least two dozen elders of the Moose Clan, Dog Tribe, Bear Folk, Sea People and other assembled tribes.

There was no sign of the Purple Wizard – but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t pop out at some dramatic moment to shout “Aha! You are in my trap!”

The assembly eyed the Wizards with interest and suspicion, but Davlo sensed no outright hostility. He immediately walked around the fire pit to approach the elder seated in the place of honor on a low chair opposite the door.

This ancient fellow had a wrinkled face with the texture of a dried yam. He was thin, with knobby knees and elbows, and wore a loose mooseskin shirt stitched with colorful beads. His headdress was an elaborate cap sporting bronzed

moose antlers hung with many ribbons and bells. His left hand clutched a stout staff of yew wood that split into a Y at the top. If you squinted, it almost looked like the head of a moose.

Davlo bowed from the waist and said, "*Yanuk rooga nij-nij garba dosh!*"

The Moose Clan elder grinned. "*Doi? Dooka nuush tark garba dosh!*" he replied.

"*Luk! Trop-trop wurfu doog klarg. Tark garba,*" said Davlo.

"*Luk, luk. Nim-yap Ukko. Ukko ta.*"

"*Chak. Davlo ta, brug-brug. Grimmir ta, Tuonetar ta, Fafnir ta. Tok-nuush bruga.*"

Davlo bowed again to the colorfully attired barbarian, who responded by tapping his moose stick twice on the ground.

"You speak Barbarian?" said Tuonetar.

Davlo shrugged. "A smattering of the Old Speech, a few words in Sea Folkish," he said. "And a bit of Wild Tongue. All barbarians do not speak the same language, you know."

"They ought to," said Tuonetar. "It would simplify things. But why didn't you speak up before, when they first caught us?"

"If they proved unfriendly, it is better they not know I can understand them," explained Davlo. "But having brought us to their chiefs, it was best to present ourselves properly. This, the great chief, is Ukko, *nim-yap* of the Moose Clan. Which means shaman."

At the mention of his name, the *nim-yap* waved his stick and spoke rapidly.

"What does he say?" said Grimmir.

"He addresses his fellow elders. I will translate," said Davlo. "He says perhaps it would be well to kill us and throw our bones to the crows. But this is the time of the Great Barbarian Games, he says, the Summer Barbariad. A peaceful gathering for all tribes and clans to put aside feuds and compete in feats of skill and strength. As host tribe, the

Moose Clan extends the peace of the Games even to the Funny Robe People – that’s us. He says the dwellers in towns and castles were decent folk once, hunters and herders, before their ancestors devolved into diggers of dirt and readers of books. So we should pity the Funny Robe People and not kill them, but instead offer warm *glak*. He adds that if we cause trouble, then, naturally, they should slit our throats and place our heads on sharp sticks.”

Ukko’s weathered face split into a gruesome grin. “Good, Davlo of the Funny Robe People! You follow my meaning. Welcome!”

“You speak Gibberish!” said Tuonetar.

“Sure!” said Ukko. “Sometimes we raid your realm. It is good to speak the language of those you rob. How else to ask where they hid the valuables? Ha! But don’t worry! Today is a friendly time. We offer you *glak*!”

“What is *glak*?” asked Fafnir. He rubbed his stomach. “Food, I hope.”

“*Glak* is a ceremonial beverage of curdled moose milk served as a sign of hospitality,” said Davlo.

“Yes!” said Ukko, clearly pleased. “You know our ways! Good! Sit, sit. The servants will bring a bag of *glak*. As you know, we age the *glak* in bags sewn from moose bladder.”

“Gods! Why?” asked Tuonetar.

“For flavor, of course,” said Ukko. “Sit! So, what think you of the Great Barbarian Games?”

“A most impressive display of prowess and talents of the uncivilized tribes of Midgård,” said Davlo.

“Uncivilized?” said Ukko. He laughed. “I am proud to say we have never needed *uncivilizing*, for we Moose folk were never civilized in the first place! Rather, I call you the unbarbarized children of our wayward cousin Havind, yes? Living in stone houses cut off from wind and sky, yes?”

Davlo inclined his head. “It is as you say, wise Ukko. But I must admit, I am unfamiliar with these Games.”

“Oh, they are something new!” explained Ukko,

bobbing his head delightedly. "This is only the third Barbariad. It is a great honor for the Moose Clan to host the Games, though we are chagrined that Sullen the Mighty has not joined us."

Several of the other elders repeated this name and nodded.

"Who is this Sullen?" asked Davlo.

"Ah! You know not Sullen?" He frowned. "Perhaps it is as well, for Sullen is barbarian to the core, and has no truck with civilized folk except to swing his sword at them. Sullen is the ideal our warriors aspire to. His deeds are legend. And he wins every contest he enters. Javelin, riding, axe throw, boulder toss, all! You witnessed the Feat of Pie Eating, yes? The winner consumed twenty-eight pies, I am told. To Sullen that is but a snack! At the last Barbarian Games, Sullen ate one hundred sixty pies, stopping only because we ran out of pie. Then he ate an ox for supper, and washed it down with a tun of spiced mead! Many are disappointed that Sullen is not here, but he is no doubt adding to his legend elsewhere. Ah! But here is the *glak*!"

Servants entered and presented each of the company a brightly painted clay drinking bowl. The *glak* bladder was brought forth with great ceremony and presented to Ukko. He sniffed the neck of the bag, then licked his thumb and stuck it in to scoop out a bit of *glak*, which he tasted. Ukko nodded solemnly and pronounced the *glak* suitable.

The servant filled Ukko's bowl by squeezing the bladder and causing a lumpy, stinking, yogurt-like substance to ooze out. When all the company's had been served, Ukko raised his bowl to eye level. The other barbarians did likewise. The Wizards followed their example.

"Strangers, be welcome as our guests and under our protection until the time of your departure," said Ukko.

"We are grateful for your hospitality," replied Davlo. "May the Great Moose in the Sky slobber blessings upon you."

Ukko grunted his approval of Davlo's words, and drained his bowl. All the barbarians followed suit, as did Davlo, Grimnir and Fafnir.

All eyes turned to Tuonetar. She stared at the bowl of *glak* and fought the urge to vomit. The smell was disgusting. Those random, gooey lumps were sickening. She closed her eyes and turned her head to the side.

"I can't drink this," she said.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the barbarians. The grim-faced warriors reached for their knives.

23: GLAK

“Drink,” hissed Davlo.

“I don’t want to,” said Tuonetar. She crossed her arms. “It smells like rancid curds.”

“Naturally,” said Davlo. “*Glak* is rancid moose curds.”

Tuonetar shook her head defiantly. “I don’t want any.”

“To refuse is a grave insult to our hosts,” whispered Davlo.

Tuonetar shrugged. “They’ll get over it.”

“Honor will demand they kill us. Most painfully.”

“We can defend ourselves,” said Tuonetar.

“But we can avoid needless violence if you simply drink,” said Davlo.

“It’s not bad!” offered Fafnir. He wiped away a *glak* mustache with his sleeve. “I could take a refill.”

“Do drink, Tuonetar,” said Grimmir. “We are guests.”

All the company was watching her. Mindful of the rising tension in the tent, Tuonetar raised the bowl to her lips. She screwed up her face and then tossed back the *glak* in one gulp, figuring she’d taste it less that way. The flavor was like dirty socks full of moldy cheese soaked in sour cream left in the sun. Then marinated in moose urine.

“*GLAK!*” wheezed Tuonetar.

The barbarians gave an appreciative cheer. “*Glak! Glak!*” they roared, laughing and smiling.

“How do you like it?” said Ukko.

Tuonetar couldn't answer at first. She gagged and choked, fighting to keep the vile beverage down. “That's ... good *glak*,” she finally gasped.

“Ha!” said Ukko. “Yes, we have shared *glak*! Now you are our honored and welcomed guests!”

“We thank you,” said Davlo. “But, alas, we cannot tarry long with you, for honor demands we fulfill our quest.” The barbarians nodded and made clicking noises of approval at Davlo's mention of honor's demands. Barbarians were big on honor. It was a whole thing. “We must continue our pursuit of the Purple Wizard.”

“Tell of this quest,” said Ukko. “I love a good quest.”

Davlo related as much as he could without revealing the secrets of the Forbidden Chamber and other confidential Wizard matters. Grimmir added a few clarifying comments.

Ukko nodded thoughtfully. “If such a one came this way, I do not know. But perhaps one of our scouts saw this Purple Wizard. Summon Tyrg, captain of the outriders!”

Tyrg proved to be the leader of the scouts who first encountered the Wizards.

“Tyrg,” said Ukko. “In recent days, did you encounter another such as these, one of the Funny Robe People?”

“I did spy such a one, garbed in purple. The Funny Robe passed at a distance from the camp and did not come closer.”

“Which way did the Purple Wizard go?” asked Davlo.

“On the westward track. I can show you.”

“That track forks not an arrow shot from here,” said Ukko. “Which way did the Purple Robe go?”

“I did not see once the stranger turned away from the camp.”

“Where do the westerly tracks lead?” asked Davlo.

Ukko grinned. “The left-hand track crosses a bubbling stream and winds through many pleasant fields and valleys teeming with game, fragrant with flowers, and alive with birdsong.”

“And the right-hand path?”

Ukko frowned. “The right-hand path goes up into the *Frunghastodtorbild*.” The other barbarians swore under their breath and averted their eyes.

“The *Frunghastodtorbild*?” said Davlo, setting off another round of eye-darting and muttered oaths. “My Wild Tongue is a bit rusty. That means ‘Wiggly-Spirit-Mounds-of-Joy’ does it not?”

The shaman shook his head. His headdress rattled like wind chimes. “In your tongue it translates as ‘Unsettling-Haunted-Hills-of-Death.’”

“Ah,” said Davlo.

“What now?” asked Fafnir. “Do we split up?”

Grimnir shook his head. “Only together do we have a chance against the Purple Wizard. Better we all follow the wrong trail together than two overtake him and be overmatched.”

“I agree,” said Davlo. “But which trail to take? If only there were some way to divine the answer.”

“Ah!” said Ukko. “Divination! That is easy! Come, we will slaughter a goat and you shall soon have your answer.”

“What does a goat know?” asked Fafnir.

“We shall see!” said Ukko. “Come!”

24: THE HIGH ROAD

Guided by the guts of an unfortunate goat, the Wizards set out once more in pursuit of the Purple Wizard, knowing that they were getting closer, ever closer to their quarry. But also knowing they must walk into the dreaded *Frunghastodtorbild*, the hills which – according to the superstitious barbarians – were haunted by the restless spirits of the ancient dead. Hills which, it was whispered, were a gateway to the Land of Death itself, from which no one returns alive.

They walked steadily throughout the day, pausing only for brief rests and to remove irritating pebbles from their pointy slippers. As they walked, low gray clouds moved into place, obscuring the sun. A steady, chilly breeze blew. The day grew gloomy and bleak, as if some unseen cosmic hand were slowly adjusting a dimmer switch to dial down the sun.

The trail wound up and around rocky hills lightly fringed with tufts of scraggly grass and skinny twisted shrubs. That night they made camp in the shelter of an outcropping and dined on the tough moose jerky and other provisions the generous barbarians had provided. They dared not light a proper fire for fear it might alert the Purple Wizard to their position.

In the distance, wolves howled at the gibbous moon. And there were other sounds in the night too, disturbing

sounds, like scrabbling of misshapen claws on the shadowy rocks, or the distant wail of lost souls crying out in anguish. Or, perhaps it was crickets. Hard to tell. The Wizards slept fitfully and dreamed troubled dreams.

In the morning, after a breakfast of moose jerky, the hunt continued. At mid-morning they found the first unmistakable sign their quarry had passed this way.

“Stop!” said Grimnir.

The other Wizards froze. “What’s the problem?” said Tuonetar.

“No problem.” Grimnir knelt to examine the ground closely. “Look here at these tracks. These are proper slippers, not the sandals of a barbarian. And beside them, those small round impressions – a staff. A Wizard came this way.”

“Or a shepherd,” said Fafnir.

Tuonetar scoffed. “A shepherd? Truly?”

“I’m just saying. Sandals and a staff. It could be a shepherd.”

“Have you seen any sheep, or anything for sheep to graze in the last, I don’t know, ten leagues or so?”

“Well, no, but– ”

“Grimnir, there, on that bramble, look,” said Davlo, pointing.

Caught on the stem of a thorny bush close beside the trail was a snatch of purple thread. Grimnir nodded. “The Purple Wizard came this way.”

“Yes,” said Tuonetar. “Unless Fafnir’s shepherd wears purple while tending invisible rock-eating sheep.”

“Invisible sheep eat rocks?” said Fafnir.

Tuonetar rolled her eyes. “Not these rocks. Wrong sort. Makes the sheep gassy.”

Heartened by this thread of a clue, the four companions quickened their pace. The clouds pressed low and the wind picked up, slicing through their robes like blades of cold steel, yet on they pressed, eager to overtake the Purple Wizard.

Early in the afternoon they reached a place where the trail narrowed as it threaded along the edge of a cliff. Coming around a bend, the Wizard's nostrils were assaulted by a pungent odor.

"Gah! That smell!" said Tuonetar. "Did a skunk explode?"

"It's the Hairy One," said Fafnir nervously. "I just know it."

"Harry who?" said Tuonetar.

"The Hairy One. A big, hairy, savage beast-like creature that lives in wild places," explained Fafnir, waving his arms above his head. "About ten feet tall. Has huge feet. Smells terrible."

"Like a Troll?"

Fafnir shook his head. "Not a Troll. Smarter. Cunning, they say."

"So a Beast Man, you mean?"

"No," said Fafnir. "Beast Men run in packs. The Hairy One walks alone."

"And does what exactly?"

"Steals hams, for one thing."

"Ham?" scoffed Tuonetar.

"It loves ham. Leaves big footprints. Frightens drunks."

"I imagine it is only sighted by drunks," said Tuonetar, rolling her eyes. "There is no Hairy One. Unless it keeps invisible sheep too?"

"Quiet, you two," said Grimnir. He examined the ground minutely. "The Purple Wizard was here. There was a fight."

Davlo nodded. "The marks are plain, my friend. Look at the vitrification on this rock face." He pointed out a smooth, dark section that seemed out of place amid the rough surrounding stone.

"Vitri-what?" said Fafnir.

"Turned to glass," said Tuonetar.

Grimnir nodded. "Lightning strike. And there the

ground is blackened – fireball. A Wizard gave battle here.”

“Or maybe he was just messing around, melting rocks and stuff,” said Fafnir. “I do that all the time. Why is everyone looking at me like that? I do!”

Tuonetar sighed. “We believe you, Faf.”

“Perhaps our quarry fought a rival Wizard who sought to relieve him of his prize?” said Davlo.

Grimnir strolled to the edge of the cliff, shaking his head. He pointed. “From this location spells were aimed there and there. You see the angles. But there is no sign of counter-spells. Only one Wizard was in this fight.”

“Fighting who?” asked Tuonetar.

“The Hairy One,” said Fafnir softly. “They say it attacks unwary travelers.”

“This is the same Hairy One who so stinks you can smell it coming a mile off?” scoffed Tuonetar. “How can your Hairy One sneak up on anyone, much less our Purple Wizard?”

“Ho!” boomed a deep voice, startling the companions. “I was right! You curs come to finish your master’s work! We shall see about that!”

The voice’s owner emerged from the shadows of an outcropping. Muscular of limb and broad of chest, he stood at least a head taller than the Wizards, not counting his horned metal helmet. His corded neck was like unto a beer keg. His black mane was coiled into war braids woven about colorful beads and bits of bone. His smoldering eyes – one blue, one green – were disturbingly unfocused, like those of an angry drunkard. His leather boots had seen many leagues of wear. His loincloth, secured by a jeweled belt no doubt looted from some ancient treasure hoard, bore deep stains of blood and drink and gravy. He wore a chainmail vest like it was a linen shirt, oblivious to its weight.

His musky body odor was considerable.

“Gah!” cried Fafnir. “The Hairy One!”

“That would explain the stench,” muttered Tuonetar.

But this was no furry folktale. He bore a great steel sword held two-handed. The blade was notched from much hard use, yet looked still sharp enough to remove one or more heads at a swing.

“Who are you?” demanded Davlo.

The warrior threw back his head and laughed. His laughter was wild and uninhibited, as if he had just heard the most amusing jest in the world. Exchanging wary looks, the Wizards back slowly away. The swordsman hacked up a gob of phlegm and spat in the dust.

“I am Sullen the Barbarian! Slayer of Ten Thousand Foes!” He narrowed his eyes. “Soon to be ten thousand and four.”

25: SULLEN

“Sullen? We have heard of you!” said Davlo.

This was all the encouragement the barbarian needed. “Aye! The songs of Sullen are sung in many a camp and feasting hall. Sullen the Mighty! Sullen the Destroyer! Sullen the Conqueror! Also called Bamra among the tribes of the Savage Coast, Smells-Like-Buffalo among the Red Folk, and Snookums by more sloe-eyed princesses than you will ever know! Some people call me Maurice. I don’t know why and I never ask before I kill them. I have been thief and outlaw, mercenary and treasure hunter, and I briefly did stand-up in Sarnaath, where many a heckler did I lay low!” He spat another gooey gob. “You may also hear me named Sullen the Simmerian, for such is my homeland.”

“Ah! You are from Sumer,” said Davlo, who took an interest in far off lands.

Sullen frowned. “Simmer, not Sumer.”

Davlo shrugged. “You say Simmer, I say Sumer.”

“It’s Simmer!” insisted Sullen.

“Sumer,” said Davlo, nodding.

“Simmer!”

“Sumer.”

“Let’s call the whole thing off,” said Grimnir. “I know no land called Simmer. Where might—”

Sullen’s face reddened. “Now you call me a liar? By

Cram, I will gut the lot of you and wear your intestines like a necklace!”

“Ewww,” said Tuonetar.

“Friend Sullen,” said Davlo soothingly. “We have no quarrel. We are Wizards of the Order of Magick who—”

“I know you are Wizards!” said Sullen. “Your ratty robes and funny sticks say as much! That is why you must die!” Sullen whirled his sword around his head for emphasis. “Gods of Night and Day, how I hate Wizards! More than I hate giant spiders, cursed gems, and foul things from the Outer Darkness combined!”

Sullen raised his sword straight above his head, striking an impractical pose.

“Nice abs,” said Tuonetar.

“Blood and Glory!” shouted Sullen.

He became a blur of motion, moving faster than any man should without benefit of a Haste spell. He swung at Davlo. Only the stalwart Wizard’s pantherish agility saved him from losing his head as he dodged backward and fell flat on his back. (But gracefully. Like a sleek and graceful panther full of graceful sleekness.)

Sullen rushed Fafnir and Tuonetar. Fafnir tried to launch a fireball. Rattled, he miscued and set himself on fire.

“Arrgh!” cried Fafnir. “It burns!”

Tuonetar took a solid blow from flat of Sullen’s blade. She went flying, bounced off a boulder, and slumped to the ground.

Grimnir, with Haste, dashed out of Sullen’s reach, then loosed a bolt of Death Lightning. The blast struck Sullen full in the chest – yet was somehow downgraded to a few weak sparks.

Sullen laughed his arrogant laugh. “Save your funny light show, little Wizard!” He leapt toward Grimnir.

“*T’monfiremonfiremonfire!*” shouted Fafnir. He ran about in a circle, trailing a ribbon of flame like a comet’s tail.

Tuonetar found her staff and doused Fafnir with a spray of Water. Fafnir kept running and yelling, slow to realize he was no longer alight.

As Sullen charged, Grimmir hit the barbarian with steam (which cleared the barbarian's pores), ice daggers (that struck with the fatal force of a snow cone), and a stone spray (it hit like a mud pie). The barbarian shrugged off every attack and kept coming.

"Your cheap tricks don't impress me!" snarled the barbarian.

Grimmir was stumped – and running out of room to retreat. Sullen used no Magick means to nullify his spells, of that he felt sure. It seemed rather that Magick simply gave up as it approached the barbarian. So pure and primitive was Sullen's hatred of Wizards, so deep his disdain for Magick, that spells lost their nerve in his presence. Sullen stared down the elements and made them blink.

It was enough to make even the most capable Wizard doubt himself.

Such doubt was fatal to effective Magick.

And fatal to Wizards too. Grimmir was backed up to the cliff's edge, with nothing behind him but a long way down.

Sullen raised his sword to deliver a blow meant to split Grimmir in half from collarbone to crotch. *This barbarian is like a force of nature*, Grimmir thought. If Fury were an element, it would look, sound and smell like Sullen, with his hard, dangerous lines – all red rage, wild eyes, incoherent bellows, flecks of foam flying from his mouth, and waves of stink that could stun a bear.

In other circumstances, Grimmir would enjoy studying the curious effect of the barbarian on Magick and vice versa. But this was not the best time for such an inquiry. The smart thing to do, as much as it galled Grimmir, was to run away. There was no good reason to continue this fight. Magick was ineffectual, and to confront this wild, smelly man in physical combat would be —

“Lay on, Sumerian!”

— something only Davlo would do.

Most Wizards of that era were inept with swords and other weapons. (In truth, it was around this time the Order began requiring all blades in the hands of Wizards be blunted for safety.) The technique of imbuing a sword with Magick, or even channeling spells through a blade was known, but it was not a common practice. Most Wizards preferred to rely on staff alone. A quirky few carried swords instead. None bore staff and blade together. It simply wasn't done.

Davlo was different. Though a Wizard, he came from a line of noble warriors and was trained in the arts of non-Magick combat. Davlo wore a sword and, seeing that Magick was strangely useless against Sullen, he drew it.

Davlo's blade flashed, as he made Haste to interpose himself between Sullen and Grimmir. Despite the weight of the barbarian's weapon and the strength of his arm, Davlo met and checked Sullen's blow.

Davlo and Sullen stood toe to toe, blades locked, each seeking to push the other's weapon aside.

“You are ill-mannered,” said Davlo.

“I'm a barbarian!” said Sullen.

Sullen pressed harder. He was far from breaking a sweat – but he was equally far from moving Davlo off his mark.

“You had no cause to attack us,” insisted Davlo.

“You are Wizards! That is cause enough!” snarled Sullen.

“We did you no harm.”

“One Wizard is as bad as another!” said Sullen. “With your schemes and plots and your unnatural meddling with forces no mortal should meddle with!”

“If Wizards don't meddle with Magick, who will?” asked Davlo.

“That's my point!” said Sullen. “I do Midgård a favor with every Wizard I kill!”

“We are not so easy to kill,” said Davlo.

“Ha! I’ve sent many a Wizard to Niflheim! You four and your purple-robed master are soon to join them!” said Sullen.

“The Purple Wizard is a villain foul and bloody!” said Davlo. “A thief and a killer of Wizards.”

“When Wizard kills Wizard, everyone wins!” said Sullen.

With his off hand, the barbarian punched Davlo in the face – most unsporting! Davlo fell back and hit the ground hard. Sullen gave an animal growl of triumph and raised his sword for the kill!

26: DUST IN THE WIND

Ere Sullen struck, a Magick Gust blew sand in his face. Undeterred, the blinded barbarian delivered his killing blow. Fortunately for Davlo, he delivered it to the wrong address – Sullen’s sword bit into the ground a hand’s breadth to the right of Davlo’s head. Davlo did not give Sullen another chance. He sprang to his feet, sword at ready.

“Stand still, you capering ape!” Sullen swung wildly, wiping at his eyes with his left hand.

Davlo hesitated. He might finish the barbarian now, but it was against his principles to stab the man while he couldn’t see. Especially since this was an unfortunate misunderstanding. Sullen was not a true enemy – or, at least, Davlo and his companions were not Sullen’s enemies, despite his evident anti-Wizard prejudice. There had to be a way to end this fight and learn what Sullen knew of the Purple Wizard. Though Davlo could not long match the barbarian’s brute strength, perhaps he could win with superior swordplay...

“Davlo! Move!” shouted Grimnir. “You are in the way!”

“Sullen will slay you all!” shouted the barbarian. He continued to slice empty air nowhere near Davlo.

Grimnir’s staff glowed with power. Tuonetar and Fafnir flanked him and readied their own spells.

“We need him alive!” said Davlo.

Drawn by Davlo's voice, Sullen came his way.

"Move, Davlo!" said Grimnir. "I know what I'm doing!"

Yes, thought Davlo, *Yes, you would*.

He dodged away from Sullen.

"Now!" said Grimnir.

Davlo's companions loosed their spells – but not at Sullen. Fafnir and Grimnir pulverized the stony earth with Fiery Rays of Force, gouging out a large pit into which Sullen tumbled. Tuonetar dropped a Water Bomb in the hole, soaking Sullen and turning the loose soil into thick, sticky mud. Sullen sank to his smelly armpits.

"*Yarrhhhhh!*" he raged. With effort, the big barbarian managed two slow-motion steps before the clinging mud held him fast.

Davlo stepped to the edge of the pit. "Now you will listen to us."

"Bah!" Sullen hurled his sword like a spear. Davlo pivoted out of the blade's path. The sword struck sparks as it ricocheted off a boulder and bounced over the cliff.

"Do you think Sullen helpless?" fumed the barbarian. "I will claw through the earth itself and squeeze the life from you with my mud-caked hands!"

The barbarian took a deep breath, evidently meaning to submerge himself.

"Wait!" said Davlo. He sheathed his sword and raised his empty hands. "Peace! We only want to talk!"

"An odd way with words, you Wizards have!" snarled Sullen. "Fire and lightning and storm are your arguments."

"You attacked us!" said Tuonetar. "We've the right to defend ourselves!"

"That treacherous purple ape you serve struck the first blow!" countered Sullen.

"You mean the Purple Wizard," said Davlo. "Whom we seek, but do not serve. Our mission is justice."

Sullen rumbled with laughter. "Ho! I see the truth of it now! The Purple One has cheated you of your reward for

some bit of Wizard's deviltry and you seek revenge."

"The Purple Wizard is a killer and a thief!" said Tuonetar.

Sullen shrugged. "So is every Wizard."

"Be that so," said Grimmir. "Do you know which way the Purple Wizard went?"

"Straight to Hel for all I care!" said Sullen. "It matters not to Sullen!"

Davlo tried a different tack. "What words passed between you?" he asked.

"Words of wrath!" said Sullen. "I spied the Purple One on the trail, bound west as I came east. I was in a merry mood, for I was soon to join the Great Barbarian Games where I meant to win every contest! Aye, in my mind's eye already I enjoyed the prizes heaped at my feet, the thunderous roar of the throng at my triumphs, and the smoldering glances of my admirers. Thus besotted with visions of my own glory, I thought to let the Wizard go just this once, not wanting to come late to the games. I nodded as we passed – and then the treacherous rogue shot me in the back with some tickling spell."

"A tickling spell?"

"One of those Wizard beams you people spray about."

"A Death Ray of Destructive Force, perhaps?" said Grimmir.

"How should I know what you call it?" scoffed Sullen. "Lo, the battle was joined! I drove the Wizard back with mighty blows. I'd have taken the dog's purple-hooded head off if some devilish spell hadn't brought down half the hilltop on me!"

"You were buried under a rockslide," said Grimmir.

"What did I just say?" snarled Sullen. "Aye! The coward dropped a mountain on me and ran away. By the time I dug myself free the villain was gone. I thought to give chase, but then I would miss the glory of the Games. I resolved to track the lout down afterward. Sullen is the greatest tracker

in this world or any! There is no place the Purple One can hide that Sullen cannot follow!”

“Where was the Purple Wizard bound?” said Davlo.

Sullen laughed. “We didn’t discuss it! Not in so many words, but you know Wizards! Your lot can’t help going on about whatever big grand plot you’re up to.”

“And?” asked Tuonetar.

Sullen scowled. “In truth, I paid little heed. Something about the moon being right and a ceremony of ultimate power and ruling the world. The usual Wizard blather.”

“The moon will be full three nights hence,” said Grimmir. “Where is this ceremony to occur?”

“I didn’t ask,” said Sullen.

“Was there no hint?”

“Cram’s gams, with all your questions! I heard the Well of Lost Souls mentioned. That might have something to do with it.”

“Where is this Well of Lost Souls?” asked Grimmir.

“It is a shunned place,” said Sullen. “A ruin of a people long vanished from the world. It lies deep in the *Frunghastodtorbild*. Maybe four days march on your stubby little Wizard legs.”

“You could get there sooner?” said Grimmir, eyes narrowing.

“Aye! Sullen can run night and day, tireless as a wolf. I would be there by sundown tomorrow.”

Grimmir mused aloud. “Then you might ...”

“Nay!” said Sullen. “I’ll not do your assassin’s work! Sullen is bound for glory at the Games! If you bathrobed runts manage to kill each other while I’m busy, well and good. If not, I’ll hunt down the survivors at my leisure.”

“If the Purple Wizard succeeds, then you and all the world are in peril,” said Davlo. “The villain stole an artifact of great power.”

“Oh? What is it?” demanded Sullen.

“Erm ... we don’t know,” admitted Davlo.

Sullen yawned. "You Wizards and your trinkets. If you staff monkeys are so worried, then you'd best be on your way. But first, help me out of this mire. I may yet reach the Games before the contests end."

"Do you still mean to kill us?" said Davlo.

"Aye!" snarled Sullen. He frowned, considering. His frown transformed into a broad, if grudging smile. "But later. Give me hand, will you?"

Grimnir shook his head. "The mud will dry in a few hours. Free yourself then, barbarian. Farewell."

27: MAKING HASTE

With Sullen's angry oaths and threats ringing in their ears for at least half a league, the four Wizards renewed their pursuit of the Purple Wizard.

Tuonetar, Davlo and Fafnir had all studied the Book of Haste during their journey. Now, mindful of the urgent need to overtake their foe, it was time to apply what they had learned.

The effects of repeated Haste magick on a Wizard's mind and body are much disputed. Some believe repeated long-term exposure to accelerating Magick causes premature aging and shortens a Wizard's years. Others hold that not only is Haste completely safe, but say regular Hasting is beneficial, conferring improved reflexes, better hand-eye coordination and quickness of thought. Then again, there is gossip that too much Haste leads to poor digestion, chronic nervousness and attention deficit disorder. The opinion of most Wizards clusters in the middle – use no more Haste than necessary, just in case those stories about exploding hearts and permanent brain damage are true. Also, no one wants to end up like Tobias the Blurry.

With these cautions in mind, the four companions decided to Haste their way along the highland path no more than twice each hour. Only Fafnir had not yet mastered the

Magick, so the others took turns casting the spell on him.

In the afternoon of the second day after their encounter with the barbarian they spotted the Purple Wizard. They were picking their way along the rim of a deep gorge through which a foul-smelling river flowed, when sharp-eyed Tuonetar saw their quarry.

“Look there!”

She pointed toward the small mountain that dominated the skyline at the far end of the gorge. A saddleback ridge linked the last hill on the south side of the gorge with the eastern face of the mountain, which rose at a sharp angle toward a summit plateau wreathed in mist. From a certain angle the mountain looked like a big boot. A mountain stream that tumbled its way down the slope in a series of cascades even gave the appearance of laces.

A narrow path zigzagged up the jagged mountain face, threading around the many buttresses, ridges, towers and pinnacles that adorned it. Perhaps a quarter way up the slope a solitary figure climbed the trail, little more than a purple speck against the dark rock.

“We have the villain now!” said Fafnir.

“Don’t count our ducks before they are rowing,” said Davlo.

“What ducks?” asked Fafnir.

“He means we haven’t caught up yet,” said Tuonetar.

“But we will,” said Grimnir. “Come on.”

The footing along the top of the gorge was treacherous, often requiring the Wizards to scramble from boulder to boulder or balance on small ledges scattered with loose rock. One misstep would send them plummeting into the river hundreds of feet below. With their footing so unsure, they dared not risk using Haste on the climb.

“So close, and yet so far!” vented Fafnir.

“Yet we are gaining,” said Davlo. “We will surely catch up soon.”

At this moment the wind shifted and a cold,

impenetrable white mist rolled down the mountain, obscuring everything. The Wizards could not even see their own feet.

“Of course,” added Davlo. “I have been wrong before.”

28: WIZARDS IN 'THE MIST'

A Wizard's staff is useful when climbing a strange mountain in the dark. First, it serves as a walking stick. Second, the glowing orb at the tip provides illumination – very important when one wrong step can send you plummeting to your death. Third, a jolt of healing Life is just the thing for the inevitable less-than-fatal tumbles, scrapes and bruises that come with any nighttime ascent.

Even with staves in hand, it was a wild, dangerous climb up the side of Boot Mountain (as they named it). The four Wizards reached the base of the mountain just before dusk. But pausing was not an option. The Purple Wizard still climbed – they could tell by the faint bobbing pinprick of light from a staff high above.

The full moon rose about an hour past sunset. Whatever the Purple Wizard had planned, tonight was the night and the summit of this mountain was surely the place. For all they knew, every dark spirit, daemon, devil and ghoul in Midgård was waiting up there. But it did not matter – they were sworn to stop the Purple Wizard, at the cost of their own lives if necessary.

Slanted shafts of moonlight pierced the clinging mist at irregular intervals, and cast a ghostly glow across the nighttime vista of the *Frunghastodtorbild*. No distant lights or fires or any sign of habitation was visible so far as they

could see. It seemed the four companions and the Purple Wizard they pursued were the only living things for miles around. Even the howling wolves were silent and the bats seemed to have taken the night off too.

Hour after hour they climbed the switchback path. They took few breaks and spoke little, both to conserve their energy and to focus on keeping their footing amid the loose scree that littered the trail.

At the midpoint of their climb, the trail crossed behind a waterfall. The path was a slick, wet ledge with room for only one at a time. Grimnir went first, then Davlo.

Tuonetar was next. Just before stepping behind the curtain of water, she froze.

“Long way down!” said Fafnir, shouting to be heard over the water’s roar.

“That is not helpful,” said Tuonetar.

“What are you waiting for?”

“This feels wrong somehow.”

Fafnir nodded. “I know. Very spooky. And I’m hungry.”

“This mountain is doom for one of us,” said Tuonetar, as if in a trance. “The thought has gnawed at me as we climbed. The feeling is strongest here. This is the point of no return. Death will claim one of us if we cross this stream.”

“You ought to have mentioned that before Grimnir and Davlo went on,” said Fafnir.

“It wouldn’t have stopped them,” said Tuonetar.

“Probably not,” said Fafnir. “Well, if you’re going to stop here, I’ll stay here too. Seeing as I’m a good friend and all.”

The moon broke free again, illuminating the waterfall like a sheet of silver. Tuonetar gave a grim smile. “We can’t stop here, Fafnir. That’s why it’s a Doom.”

She passed through the shadow of the falling water.

“Doomed if we do, doomed if we don’t,” muttered Fafnir.

He shrugged and followed.

Grimnir and Davlo were waiting on the other side.

“What kept you?” asked Davlo.

“Had to lace my boot,” said Tuonetar. “Let’s go.”

Upward they marched. Their muscles ached and burned and cramped and threatened to tie themselves into knots. Their feet felt more like bricks of lead with every step. The cool night air burned their nostrils with every heaving breath. The track grew ever steeper – although some long ago builder had thoughtfully constructed crude stone steps up the steep wall of the plateau that crowned the mountain.

But this is a tale of wizardry, not mountaineering. Suffice it to know that Davlo, Grimnir, Tuonetar and Fafnir made it to the top of Boot Mountain just before midnight.

There they found the Purple Wizard waiting.

29: MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF LOST SOULS

The summit of Boot Mountain was a kidney-shaped plateau surrounded by cliffs on three sides, north, south and west. The stony expanse was roughly level, though pocked with depressions and crevices. Four stone cairns, each taller than a Troll, were arranged at the cardinal points of the compass around a gaping black pit that was round and some twenty feet wide. From out of the pit came the unnerving sounds of distant moans and groans and cries of anguish. This might have been a trick of the wind, but it was hard to tell. Either way, this could only be the Well of Lost Souls.

As the four companions approached, jets of flame flared from the cairns like signal fires. The flames chased away the mist and created a circle of flickering light around the pit. At pit's edge, back to them, stood the Purple Wizard.

"I have been expecting you," said the renegade.

The four exchanged glances and, by silent agreement, took the precaution of Shielding themselves before advancing into the light.

"Close enough," said the Purple Wizard.

It occurred to Davlo that a sudden attack might take the Purple Wizard by surprise. But he dismissed the thought. Their foe was powerful and dangerous, and certainly not

foolish enough to face them without prepared defenses, even if those were not visible. Who knew what was hiding in that pit?

“Your voice has changed,” said Davlo.

The Purple Wizard scoffed. “I have no need to disguise my voice as I did in the Forbidden Chamber.” She threw back her purple hood to reveal ... a slightly smaller purple hood embroidered with astrological symbols. “I no longer need conceal my identity, for I stand on the threshold of ultimate victory. Know then, that I am ... Azimuth!”

She said her name with such conviction that the four younger Wizards were a bit embarrassed not to recognize it. They looked to each other for help. Tuonetar shook her head. Fafnir shrugged his ignorance. Davlo cocked his head at Grimnir, who gestured that he had nothing.

“Did you not hear me?” said the Purple Wizard. “It is Azimuth you face!”

“I am Davlo,” said Davlo, making a courteous bow.

“I don’t care who you are!” said Azimuth. “I am Azimuth! Does that name mean nothing to you?” A certain rising note of irritation crept into the Wizard’s voice.

“Should it?” asked Grimnir. He signed for Tuonetar and Fafnir to spread out to the flanks. Clustering too closely together was usually a bad idea in Magick combat.

“Azimuth the Upright? Nothing?”

“Sorry,” said Fafnir, looking down sheepishly. “But I’m not too good with names and dates. Are you famous?”

“Do they teach you nothing of the past these days?” said Azimuth, trembling with anger. “Have those doddering fools at Aldrheim erased all record of my deeds?”

“So it would seem,” said Grimnir.

“Whatever your name, we arrest you in the name of the Order of Magick,” said Davlo.

“Arrest me? I was head of the Order!” Azimuth turned suddenly. “By right, I still am!”

The voices in the Well of Souls howled louder.

30: THE FORGOTTEN ONE

Davlo shook his head. "I have memorized all the heads of the Order. There is a plaque in the library. Your name does not appear."

"Oh?" said Azimuth. She took a step forward. "Is there an unexplained gap on the plaque? About a century back?"

"Well, there *is* a scorch mark where a name might have been," admitted Davlo.

"That was me."

"Fandulf is the Headmaster now," said Fafnir.

"So he pretends," snorted Azimuth, whirling to face him. "Almost-Wise Fandulf – ha! I could tell you tales! No, my rightful place was usurped by Fandulf and his cronies long ago. Truly, you don't know who I am?"

"We know you are a thief and a murderer," said Davlo.

"Yes, that we know," added Tuonetar.

Azimuth waved away these trifles. "I only take what is mine and kill those who oppose me."

"Oh, well that makes it fine then," sneered Tuonetar.

"If you knew the name Azimuth, you would not be so insolent. You would fall to your knees and beg for mercy! Fandulf the Schemer and his lackey Yix have left you ignorant, I see. But then, whenever has the huntsman explained himself to his hounds?"

"You did *not* just call us a pack of dogs," said Tuonetar,

stamping her foot.

“Your masters sent you to die like dogs,” said Azimuth.

“We sent you scurrying when last we met,” retorted Grmnir.

Azimuth’s laughter was scornful. “That skirmish in the Forbidden Chamber? I left because I had a schedule to keep. Tonight occurs a conjunction of the moon and stars not seen in more than a thousand years. Tonight the veils between worlds are at their weakest and the tides of the sacred elements at their peak. Tonight I perform an ancient rite only one other Wizard has ever dared, and achieve ultimate power! If you dare to oppose me, then—”

“What happened to the other one?” blurted Fafnir.

“I was speaking!” snapped Azimuth.

“Sorry,” said Fafnir, timidly raising his hand as if he were in class. “I only meant to ask what happened to whoever did the ancient ultimate power thingy before. The time you said. A thousand years ago or whatever.”

Azimuth shifted uncomfortably. “That doesn’t matter.”

“But if the other Wizard got ultimate power, wouldn’t that Wizard still have ultimate power? And then how could you get it?” Fafnir looked to Tuonetar for confirmation, but she didn’t take her eyes off Azimuth.

“Does the Order no longer teach young Wizards not to interrupt their elders?” said Azimuth.

“Was only asking,” muttered Fafnir.

Azimuth’s voice quivered with contained rage. “I seek to accord you the courtesy of knowing why you must die this night. Fandulf sent you to die in ignorance. I would enlighten you. Your tenacious pursuit has earned you as much. But these disrespectful interruptions try my patience. If you prefer I kill you now, then by Odin’s unplucked eye, I shall!”

Grmnir raised a placating hand. “Stay your anger. I, for one, wish to know what this is all about. You are right – Fandulf *is* stingy with his secrets. I will hear you out before

we battle, if battle we must.”

Davlo nodded. “We will listen.”

“And not interrupt?” said Azimuth.

“Why is everyone looking at me?” said Fafnir.

“Just hush,” said Tuonetar.

Azimuth nodded approvingly. “You accuse me of crimes. But when you have heard my story, you will see you are on the wrong side. Hear the tale of Azimuth!”

31: TALE OF THE PURPLE WIZARD

Once I was a respected member of the Order of Magick. Like many a young Wizard, I craved adventure, and found it doing the Order's work. I defended villagers from Orcs and Goblins and the odd dragon. I undertook quests. I battled so-called evil in all its forms.

In time I began to question why I, a Wizard of might who could channel Fire and Cold and all the elements of power, should run here and there like an errand boy at the beck and call of kings and lords and every little village chief? You have no idea how entitled even those without actual titles felt to order us about. Every little problem demanded a Wizard. Invading barbarian horde? Let the Wizards fix it. Leaky roof? Don't pay for carpenters – send for a Wizard! Stables to be cleaned – Wizard. Cat stuck in a tree? That's a Wizard job too.

“Cats in trees?” said Tuonetar. “Really?”

Azimuth nodded. “Really. And me allergic. Ordinary folk had Wizards at their beck and call while they did naught but feast and drink and dunka-dunka the night away. Such corruption and decadence as would turn your stomach.”

“What's wrong with feasting and drinking?” asked Fafnir.

“Moreover, what is wrong with helping others?” demanded Davlo. “Is not that why the Order was founded?”

A gust of wind blew across the plateau, swirling the

robes of the Wizards around them while Azimuth slowly shook her head. The voices in the pit rose and fell with the wind ... then rose and fell again when the wind died down.

“No,” said Azimuth. “The Order was founded to make the world better. Wizards were never meant to be the world’s personal assistants. We were doing it all wrong! Wizards should serve Midgård, yes, but not by doing people’s work whilst they indulged in every dissolute vice – drinking, gambling, carousing, licking flavored ices, fishing out of season. It had to end! We Wizards are an elite group! Powerful! Often wise! Superior in every respect! It was our obligation to stamp out vice, enforce virtue, and generally tell people what to do!”

“But that is the opposite of our Order’s mission,” argued Davlo. He raised his arm to the sky. “Wizards must never seek rule over others. Thus Aldr wrote in his *Book of Precepts*.”

“So they want you to believe!” said Azimuth. She pointed accusingly at Davlo. “But if you string together selected phrases from otherwise unrelated sections the *Book of Precepts*, and conveniently ignore all conflicting passages, it is clear that Aldr commands us to rule Midgård for its own good!”

“Sound like you wanted to kill all fun,” said Fafnir. “Are you sure you’re not Azimuth the Uptight?”

“Don’t call me that!” said Azimuth.

“What?” said Fafnir. “Uptight sounds right.”

Azimuth’s staff flared red. “I warn you! You goad me to your own destruction!”

“Fafnir, enough!” said Grimmir. “I want to hear this.”

“Fine, fine.” Fafnir waved his hand dismissively.

“Hmph!” said Azimuth.

“Please go on,” said Grimmir. “The shadows grow long.”

Azimuth glowered at Fafnir, but made no move to attack. “Very well,” she said. “Then I shall continue my tale ...”

32: A TALE CONTINUED

Most Wizards very much liked the thought of telling lesser mortals what to do. I was soon elected head of the Order of Magick and banished those few who opposed my plans, such as Fandulf.

With the Order under my control I began the Great Cleansing. I sent Wizards to every town and village, to the hall of every lord, and to the King in Havindr. These Wizard-advisors told King and lesser lords alike what laws they should make. We forbade littering and improper disposal of chamber pots! Taverns, theaters, gaming halls, and other dens of iniquity were closed. Unhealthy sweets banned. Intoxicating beverages prohibited. Dancing and loud singing outlawed. Proper building standards promulgated. And a dress code! No more offending the eye with shabby clothes, uncombed beards, or mismatched hose! Soon, under my wise direction, Midgård was a paradise!

“Are you kidding?” said Fafnir. “That sounds horrible!”

Azimuth paused to glare at him and muttered something about killing Fafnir first, but went on with her tale. “Fandulf and the other exiles continued to oppose me. They put together a ragtag band of unlikely heroes and carried out an improbable plan to overthrow my New Order.” Azimuth shook her fist. “I should have known that blasted talking goat was a hoax! What were the odds?” She smoothed her robe. “Ahem! Anyway ... the ungrateful people of Midgård rose against me too. I might yet have won, but sneaky Fandulf tempted many Wizards to his side

with cheese trays and gifts of salty snacks. I had replaced such fattening and unhealthy foods with raw organic kale and broccoli. Seduced by succulent sausages, my fellow Wizards betrayed me! A terrific battle ensued. I fell, and they thought me dead.” Azimuth’s laughter was harsh and bitter. “But I was *not* dead! I was alive! Alive and planning my revenge!”

“Naturally,” said Grimnir.

“Hiding alone in the wilderness, I saw my error. I relied on others to aid me in remaking the world. But they were too weak. They lacked my vision. The solution was plain!”

“Abandon your mad dreams?” suggested Tuonetar.

Azimuth shook her fist at the sky. “I must obtain ultimate power for myself! The power to defeat every other Wizard in Midgård if need be. And all the Dwarves and Elves and Trolls and wee little Faeries and any other who might stand in my way!”

“But does such power exist?” asked Grimnir.

“Oh, yes, young Wizard,” said Azimuth. “It does. Ultimate power. I will unlock it tonight. And my staff is the key!”

33: STAFFING UP

All eyes went to Azimuth's staff. It was plain, a stout length of ash wood six feet long, shod with bronze and carved with runes worn smooth and almost illegible. Decidedly old school, it lacked a crook or crystal at the head. It appeared to be a simple walking stick.

"This is what you took from the Forbidden Chamber?" asked Davlo.

Azimuth nodded. "There it rested in obscurity for many a long year, its presence and significance unsuspected – even by me, when I was master at Aldrheim and that confounded monkey was Keeper of the Forbidden Chamber."

"That's a mean thing to call Joad," said Fafnir.

"I mean the Keeper before Joad."

"The orangutan," said Davlo.

"That's the one."

"An orangutan is not a monkey," said Davlo. "Though both are apes."

"I'm sure I don't care," snapped Azimuth.

"Why did you kill Joad?" demanded Tuonetar suddenly. "He was harmless."

"Harmless!" scoffed Azimuth. She rounded on Tuonetar. "Harmless! You call that treacherous bilge rat harmless? Joad, the turncoat? Joad, the wet sprocket? Bah!"

“You didn’t like Joad?” said Fafnir.

Azimuth shook her head and turned away from the four Wizards. “To the contrary, Joad was my best friend,” she said.

“You’re a bad friend,” said Tuonetar.

Azimuth shrugged. “People drift apart. Especially when your so-called friend betrays you and takes jobs and favors from the corrupt lackwits who, it seems, have tried to blot me out of all memory!”

“That’s no excuse,” said Tuonetar.

A cloud blotted out the moon.

Azimuth turned to face the four again. “It is, actually. But that isn’t why I killed him. I simply wanted to eliminate any witnesses to my removal of the staff. The fact that the only witness was my former friend whose betrayal directly led to my downfall and against whom I had sworn bloody, painful vengeance was merely an added bonus! Also, he knew too much. Joad knew the significance of the staff.”

“What is so special about this staff?” asked Grimmir.

“What is ultimate power for a Wizard?” asked Azimuth, answering Grimmir’s question with a question.

“To control all Magick,” said Grimmir, without hesitation.

Azimuth seemed pleased with this answer. “Right on the first guess. Grimmir, was it? You have pondered this question, I perceive.”

Grimmir shrugged, neither confirming nor denying Azimuth’s assertion. The old Wizard smiled a secret knowing smile. Again the wind rose and the mournful wails from the Well of Lost Souls grew louder.

As an aside, you may question the tactics of the four companions in holding a lengthy discourse with their foe. But, remember, they had just climbed a mountain at a brutal pace. They were stalling for time until they could catch their breath and be ready to fight. As for Azimuth – obviously she enjoyed the sound of her own voice. It was a mutually agreeable colloquy.

"I brooded long on my ignominious defeat," said Azimuth. "I was a master of Magick, but it was not enough. Yes, I could defeat any single Wizard in a duel. Any four, perhaps. But ten? A hundred? Even the superior Wizard must succumb to a superior number of her inferiors, as my own loss proved. How to prevent that from happening again? To answer this question, I delved into areas of inquiry that once I scoffed at. I consulted seers and sages and talking birds and enchanted wells. I sought out rare and forbidden texts. I studied the wretched verses of mad Lunder, read the rambling and prolix scrolls of Udo, reviewed the tortuous calculations of Igvir."

"You sought the Ninth Element!" said Grimnir.

Azimuth cocked her head speculatively. "You *have* studied these matters, Grimnir. And not per the Order's curriculum. No, they suppress knowledge of the Ninth Element, don't they?"

"Master Fandulf says there is no Ninth Element," said Grimnir. He could not hide the resentment in his voice – nor his excitement at having its existence confirmed, if only by a murdering power-mad renegade.

Azimuth scoffed. "Fandulf is wrong, as he so often is." She paused for effect. "My staff is the Ninth Element."

"Wood isn't an element," said Fafnir. "Even I know that."

"No, it isn't," agreed Azimuth. She raised the staff high. "But this is not ordinary wood. The Staff of Imbalance was cut from the branches of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, the Cosmic Axis where all worlds meet!"

"I have never heard of such an artifact," said Davlo.

"Nor had I, until quite recently," admitted Azimuth. "You may better know it as the Staff of Wizilur."

"The staff of the First Wizard?" said Davlo. "Absurd!"

"Ha!" said Azimuth. "Were I to let you hold this staff – which I won't – you could not doubt its pedigree. The elements flow effortlessly through it. The strength of every

spell is magnified tenfold. But that is the minor part of its power. You see, the failure of all past seekers of the Ninth Element is that most of them were mad—”

“And you’re not?” said Tuonetar.

“—which greatly hampered them. I approached the question from a fresh angle. Only one Wizard in all the ages was certain to understand the Ninth Element if it existed.”

“The First Wizard,” said Grinnir. He leaned forward.

“Exactly. Yet the known writings of the First Wizard are silent as to the Ninth Element. That in itself was a clue. Obviously Wizilur knew the truth and suppressed it.”

“Oh, obviously,” said Tuonetar. “Tell me, is your hood lined with tinfoil?”

34: WIZILUR'S BANE

“Why would Wizilur hide a Ninth Element?” asked Davlo, before Azimuth could respond to Tuonetar’s gibe. “I am not convinced there is such a thing – sorry, Grimnir – but if the First Wizard knew of it, surely so would all Wizards!”

“Wait, back up,” said Fafnir. “There are really nine elements?”

“No,” said Tuonetar. “But there are an infinite number of crackpots – sorry, Grimnir – looking for number nine. Honestly, if nine elements were known, you nuts would be rooting through dusty old books looking for a Tenth Element.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Azimuth and Grimnir at the same time.

“Jinx,” added Grimnir.

Azimuth paced around the edge of the pit. “It is true Wizilur’s Insight, the foundation of wizardry, concerned how to order, arrange and combine the Eight Elements into spells. But having identified the limits of Magick, Wizilur immediately set about doing what any true Wizard would do.”

“Blow stuff up?” said Fafnir.

Azimuth gave Fafnir a long, searching look before slowly nodding. “In a manner of speaking. Having found the limits, Wizilur naturally sought to transcend them. First,

by obtaining this staff, said to have been cut from the World Tree – a legendary quest in itself. The Staff magnified and intensified Wizilur's control over the elements, allowing our legendary predecessor to better blow stuff up, win new followers and impress the general populace. But still Wizilur chafed at the limits of Magick. Why must opposing elements stay opposed? Why can Wizards combine no more than five elements in a single spell?"

"Yeah, like how awesome would it be if you could mush all eight together?" said Fafnir. "What? It would be."

"It would be incredibly dangerous," said Davlo, shaking his head. "That is why it is impossible."

"You have learned well the lessons of 'mainstream' Magick," said Azimuth. "As did I. But bitter defeat made me question all I knew. I asked the questions Wizilur asked, though admittedly in a much more bitter tone: Why can't I do anything I want? Is there some way to control, alter, or delete the rules? Some way to cheat the code of the universe and gain an unfair advantage over everyone else?" Azimuth paused. "Wizilur found the answer."

"Oh, do tell us," said Tuonetar.

"You scoff," said Azimuth. "But it came to Wizilur in the Deeper Insight – the one not shared with the world. The one only recorded in Wizilur's *Secret Journal* which – well, getting a copy was another long story in itself. But I've read it. The Deeper Insight was this – the harmonious balance of the Eight Elements makes up the world. When we channel any combination of elements in a spell, somewhere in the world their opposing elements combine to maintain Balance. If you call forth Water, then somewhere else Lightning will strike. And vice versa."

"How does any of that prove a Ninth Element?" asked Davlo.

"It doesn't. That was Wizilur's Deepest Insight: the Great Paradox that what balances against Balance is

Imbalance. That's the Ninth Element – Imbalance!”

“I thought you said your staff was the Ninth Element?” said Fafnir, scratching his head.

“It isn't her staff,” Tuonetar said. “She stole it.”

“It's my staff now,” said Azimuth. “Only I know how to unlock its true power. Balance goes all wobbly at certain conjunctions of the Cosmic Axis, when the stars are just so. At those times, a big enough stick – like, say, a staff cut from Yggdrasil – can rewrite the rules and remake the world! Wizilur developed an invocation that would enable the holder of this staff to become at one with the elements! In that moment, there were no limits to what Wizilur could do!”

“And then?” asked Grinnir, taking a half-step forward.

Azimuth laughed bitterly. “With the power to reshape all creation, Wizilur wimped out, believing no mortal had the wisdom to use such power without accidentally destroying Midgård.”

“Wizilur was wise,” said Tuonetar.

“Wizilur was a fool,” said Azimuth coldly. “Tonight, I will complete Wizilur's rite. Ultimate power will be mine! Then I will remake the world into a better, cleaner, more orderly place. The way it should be – my way!”

35: HOT FLASHES

The clouds parted, again revealing the moon as it climbed slowly up the dome of the sky. Moonbeams flickered across the plateau, interacting strangely with the cairn-fires.

Azimuth peered upward, studying the moon's position. She nodded her approval. "The moon is near the seventh house and the time is nigh to begin the Rite of Imbalance. This is the dawning of the Age of Azimuth! You have heard my tale. You know my purpose. Will you join me – or will you oppose me and die?"

"You know your crazy ceremony might destroy the world," said Tuonetar. "But you're going to do it anyway?"

"You can't make sausage without slaughtering a hog," said Azimuth.

"Mmmm, sausage," said Fafnir, rubbing his belly. His stomach rumbled loudly.

Azimuth shook her head. "I admit there is a small chance I may be unable to control the cosmic forces of creation the Rite of Imbalance will unleash."

"Define small," said Tuonetar.

"Ten percent. Twenty percent tops. Maybe thirty. Again, no one has tried this since the First Wizard. But either I rule the world and reorder the multiverse to my liking or I destroy it and get my vengeance on all who betrayed and mocked me. Either way, I win. Will you join me?"

"Tell me again how you're not completely batty?" said Tuonetar.

"I take that as a no. Perhaps your friends see things more clearly?"

"You killed Joad," said Fafnir. "He was nice."

"Joad wasn't nice at all," said Azimuth. "The treacherous toad deserved to die. Not only did he betray me long ago, he hid the Staff of Imbalance in his dusty junk room of misplaced Magick."

"Nice to me, I mean," said Fafnir. "He used to share his cheese dip."

"You're rejecting a chance to partake in ultimate power over nostalgia for cheese dip?"

"I guess so."

Azimuth shook her head ruefully. "The Order of Magick has gone downhill since I left. And shall probably decay further without my guidance. Grimnir? Davlo? You are sensible Wizards. What say you?"

"We are sworn to oppose you!" said Davlo.

"Yes," said Grimnir. "Surrender the Staff and end the madness."

"Mad. Insane. Crazy. I hate it when people call me those things," said Azimuth.

"Then maybe you shouldn't act so," said Tuonetar.

FWHOOOSH!

Azimuth's attack was sudden and savage. The cairn-fires abruptly flared into huge balls of flame blossoming outward at incredible speed to engulf the four companions. True to Azimuth's boast, the heat and intensity of the fire was far beyond anything the Wizards had ever experienced. It was as if they had been thrown headfirst into Muspelheim's molten heart. Their Shield spells faltered, their defenses melted. Grimnir was parboiled, Davlo was toasted, and Fafnir was roasted. All three plopped to the stony ground, skin seared, robes smoking. They weren't moving.

Tuonetar managed to douse herself with Water and dive

for cover even as the flames overtook her. The fires roared around her, consuming the very air. She screamed. She thought Azimuth had meant to talk them to death, but she had merely lulled them into letting their guard down. One spell and it was over – the mad Wizard had won. This was the doom Tuonetar had foreseen coming up the mountain.

Or was it?

36: NOT SO WELL

Where there is Life there is Hope.

Tuonetar lay prone on the stones. She had dived into a slight depression and escaped the full effect of the flames. Azimuth thought her as dead or dying as the others.

Her mistake.

Tuonetar still had her staff in hand. She had the element of surprise – there’s your Tenth Element, you pompous goat – and she had time to get off one spell before Azimuth retaliated and, most likely, finished her.

One spell. One attack. But what? Think fast!

One chance.

One Life.

Tuonetar knew what to do.

She charged her staff with Life, reaching hard with all her will to summon and channel as much vital energy as she could before Azimuth noticed she was still conscious and finished her off with a Death Bolt.

But the killing spell didn’t come.

Azimuth was too busy talking to herself, or to the sky and night, about what a brilliant, world-conquering genius she was.

“My victory is at hand!” she said. And then some other self-praise that Tuonetar tuned out as she put all her will into detonating an area burst of healing force that went off like a green sunrise.

The flash of Life erased the awful injuries and horrific burns suffered by Tuonetar's companions, sloughing off dead flesh, rapidly growing new skin, replacing lost body fluids and missing bits, and somehow fully mending and dry cleaning their robes. A moment ago they were crispy near-corpses. Now they were whole again.

Whole but still down, dazed and vulnerable.

So Tuonetar got on her feet, aimed, and took her best shot at holding Azimuth off until her friends had their wits about them.

She loosed a spray of Lightning charged Ice Pellets. Azimuth deflected the attack easily and retaliated with a blast of Hurricane Wind that swept Tuonetar off her feet and sent her tumbling over the edge of the pit into the Well of Lost Souls.

Tuonetar lost her staff. It fell away into the darkness, bouncing twice off the side of the well as it fell. She struggled to keep her grip on the pit's smooth, rounded edge.

Azimuth loomed over her. The old Wizard placed the tip of the Staff of Imbalance not an inch from Tuonetar's nose!

"Can you fly?" he asked.

"No," said Tuonetar.

"Pity, that."

Azimuth released a fresh windblast directly in Tuonetar's face. The Push blew Tuonetar clear of her precarious perch and out into the empty space of the Well of Lost Souls.

She fell.

37: INTO DARKNESS

Davlo, Grimmir and Fafnir regained their feet only to see Tuonetar fall from view.

“Tuonetar! Noooooooooo!” shouted Davlo.

“Noooooooooo! Tuonetar!” wailed Fafnir.

Grimmir’s only comment was a spray of Death Steam – which the Staff of Imbalance dispersed with little more than a flick of Azimuth’s wrist. Grimmir summoned a brief rainstorm to douse the four cairn-fires before Azimuth could repeat her monster flame strike.

Azimuth – who had obviously meant to do exactly that – frowned and hesitated. In that moment, Davlo launched a blast of Lightning Ice shards. Azimuth deflected the missiles with the Staff of Imbalance, then dodged backward, out into the open space above the Well, where she hovered.

Fafnir, slower to react, readied a Boulder Blast, then changed his mind and decided to go with a Flaming Boulder Blast, then hesitated when he saw Azimuth levitating – then was blasted backward by the **KER-KRACK!** of a Thunderbolt that Azimuth launched without even bothering to look his way.

“You are persistent,” said Azimuth. “Unfortunately, after our lengthy chat, I can’t stay to finish you. The moon is high and the time for the ceremony is at hand.”

“Defeat us you may,” said Grimmir. “But I’ll wager we can fight long enough to prevent your ceremony.”

Azimuth laughed. “You might at that, if I stay and trade spells with you. But I’m not doing the ceremony here.”

“You’re not?” said Davlo.

“No. The place for the Rite of the Elements is at the Temple of the Sign, across the next valley.”

“You shall not pass!” said Davlo. “We will prevent—”

Azimuth strolled through the air to the other side of the Well, took four running steps, and jumped off the cliff, vanishing into the mist.

“That went poorly,” said Grimmir.

“Tuonetar!” said Davlo.

He raced to the edge of the pit. “Tuonetar!” he called. He concentrated his staffglow into a beam and swept it to and fro across the walls of the Well, desperately hoping to discover Tuonetar balanced on an unseen ledge or clinging to an improbably placed branch. There was small chance of either, but it was not unheard of.

The conjured light seemed tiny and inconsequential against the inky depths of the Well of Lost Souls.

“Help me find her!” Davlo commanded. “Tuonetar!”

Grimmir joined Davlo at the rim of the Well. He cast his light and slowly walked the perimeter of the pit. As far down as the staffglow reached the sides of the pit were smooth as a water pipe. There was no sign of Tuonetar. Grimmir dimmed his staff and clapped Davlo on the shoulder.

“She is gone, Davlo. I’m sorry. There is nothing we can do for her now.”

“We can climb down, search for her!” said Davlo. Again he called into the depths, “Tuonetar! We will save you! Hold on!”

“She does not answer,” said Grimmir. “This pit may reach to the bottom of the mountain. She could not survive such a fall. Here she fought, here she fell, here let her lie.”

“But...”

“Come my friend. We have a world to save. Isn’t that what Tuonetar would want?”

“She would want revenge,” said Davlo.

“We can do that too,” said Grimmir.

“But where is Fafnir now?” asked Davlo, looking around.

“Over here,” said Fafnir weakly. He sat up. A few wayward sparks danced around his head.

“Good,” said Grimmir. “Here is our plan. We will climb down this mountain. We will cross the valley. We will find this Temple of the Sign. And we will kill Azimuth and take back the Staff of the First Wizard. Come, we have a busy night ahead.”

Davlo shouted down the well. “Tuonetar! We will avenge you!”

38: GOING DOWNHILL

The cliff on the west face of Boot Mountain was a one thousand foot vertical drop. Without Azimuth's Cliff-Jumping spell a descent appeared suicidal. But Grimnir reasoned there must be a path between the Well of Lost Souls and the temple Azimuth spoke of that didn't involve flying or going back down the eastern approach and around the mountain. A careful search along the cliff top proved his hypothesis correct.

But that was small comfort. They found a stairway cut into the cliff – an insanely steep stairway whose steps were little more than rounded nubs of stone projecting from the cliff face – and occasionally only handholds cut into the rock. Descending this route in robes, in the dark, with staffs slung over their backs and thick mist clinging so tightly about them they could not see the ends of their slippers was almost suicidal.

But they did it.

At the base of the mountain the Wizards huffed and puffed for breath. Every muscle ached and burned and they longed to lie down and rest. Instead, they used their Magick to Heal each other, resetting their bodies, unknottng their muscles and restoring their energy.

This was actually quite risky, a fact that surprises many Wizards. While most assume that frequently irradiating

oneself with Life could not possibly be dangerous (except to a vampire. Or so I have heard.) studies have shown that overexposure to elemental healing may cause warts, euphoria, stomach ulcers, runny nose, acne, incontinence, difficulties of digestion, loss of appetite, mania, random flatulence, strange lumps and growths, lactose intolerance, uncontrollable drooling, hot flashes, chronic itching, double vision, olfactory hallucinations, ringing of the ears, a compulsive desire to eat worms, dry mouth, paranoia, fear of cats, cabbage mouth, athlete's foot, light sensitivity, chronic hiccups, shortness of breath, restless thumb syndrome and happy feet. If you experience any of these symptoms after being Healed repeatedly, tell your doctor.

The theory is that the living body can hold only so much Life at one time – the amount that keeps us alive and healthy. Too much Life produces strange and often embarrassing side effects. But sometimes necessity trumps caution. This was one of those times. Once refreshed, the three comrades located a path that presumably led across the mist-shrouded valley. In the distance loomed the outline of a great mound dotted with flickering lights, possibly torches.

“That must be the Temple of the Sign,” said Grinnir. “Perhaps half a mile from where we stand, if the mists are not playing tricks on my senses.”

They made brisk time along the path. The mists swirled thickly around them and strange noises sounded – snorting and stomping and the harsh laughter of invisible beings, as if the valley were haunted by the spirits of peoples long forgotten. Which perhaps it was. But no ghosts materialized to deter them from their mission.

Soon they stood at the base of the temple mound – an artificial hill consisting of nine terraces stacked some seventy feet high. Broad and crumbling marble steps were set in the east face of the mound. These were lined with torches that lit the way to a ceremonial space at the top.

Azimuth stood on the bottom step, shaking her head in dismay. “You three again?”

“We said we would stop you,” said Davlo.

“We are on guard this time,” said Grimnir. “You cannot beat us alone.”

“Alone?” Azimuth laughed. “We are not alone, my young friends. See for yourself!”

A burst of pale violet light flashed from Azimuth’s staff and devoured the fog like a goat eating cotton candy. The full expanse of the valley stood revealed, from the temple steps to the foot of Boot Mountain.

“As you see,” said Azimuth. “I have an army!”

“Uh-oh,” said Fafnir. “This doesn’t look good at all.”

Azimuth’s army filled the valley. It was not a smartly uniformed army drawn up in neat ranks and files. This was a vile and lawless Orc horde, clustered in unruly bands beneath crude banners and other standards, such as skulls on sticks, dead animals on sticks, the skulls of dead animals on sticks, and at least one mummified giant bat – which took two sticks.

As a rule, different Orc tribes could be relied upon to kill each other on sight. Yet here were Orcs of many tribes side by side. Not holding hands and singing songs, to be sure. There was ample shoving and cursing and hurling of insults among the factions. But the Orc chiefs kept their troops in line, presenting a more or less united front.

It got worse. For mixed among the Orcs were Goblins! Thousands and thousands of Goblins. Big Goblins. Little Goblins. Green Goblins. Gold Goblins. Grey Goblins. Goblin archers. Goblin bombers. Goblin warriors. Goblins riding wolves. Goblins riding spiders. Goblins riding wolf spiders. Goblins, Goblins everywhere!

It was an unusual mash up of monsters. Orcs – violent, nasty, and hostile. Goblins – the same. Orcs – natural enemies of humans and Wizards. Goblins – ditto. But despite all they have in common, Orc and Goblin are

hereditary enemies from day one. When they are found cooperating it can only mean one thing: Evil Overlord Protocols are in effect. If the Staff of Imbalance wasn't enough, assembling this multimonstercultural horde graduated Azimuth to the top threat level.

And that was even before considering the Trolls. Green-skinned, stringy-haired, foulness-drooling, snot-dribbling behemoths who could rip apart a moose with their bare hands. Azimuth's Trolls were outfitted with odd bits of big-and-tall armor and plus-sized sledgehammers. There were only a couple dozen Trolls, but that is two dozen too many when you have to fight them.

"Orcs, Trolls and Goblins seem far beneath your professed standards of clean living and good hygiene," said Grimmir.

"Perhaps," said Azimuth. "But such creatures have their uses when one desires to punish a corrupt society that has defied and rejected you."

"What care they for your grievances?" asked Grimmir.

"Nothing," said Azimuth. She laughed. "These monsters respect one thing only – strength! So I gave them a strong leader to follow – a leader I control. Yes – I gave them ... Brom!"

39: HOW BROM WAS MY VALLEY

“What’s a Brom?” asked Fafnir.

“You shall see,” said Azimuth. “Oh, yes!”

A shadow passed across the valley. A big shadow.

The shadow of Brom.

What looked like a smaller mound not far from the main temple mound unfolded itself skyward.

Brom was like a walking tower. Taller than a hundred year fir. Wider than a warship. The blue-gray dome of Brom’s head was like a mountaintop. It had tusks like lances, a broad flat nose and a bulging forehead like an overhanging cliff.

On Brom’s broad shoulders perched carrion birds — a flock of vultures on the left, ravens on the right. Its chest was solid as a castle wall. Brom wore no armor, only a loincloth made from what was either the pelt of an unimaginably large moose or the skins of several herds of ordinary moose. In its great callused hands Brom held a massive maul. The shaft was the trunk of an oak tree. The head was a massive block of iron, big as a feasting table.

The ground shook with every step Brom took.

“Sorry I asked,” said Fafnir.

“What is this monster?” demanded Grimmir.

“Brom is no mere monster,” said Azimuth.

“Brom is no ‘mere’ anything,” said Fafnir.

“You might call Brom an orphan god,” said Azimuth.

“I might,” said Grimnir. “But why would I?”

“Brom is an outcast, like me,” said Azimuth. “I found it wandering alone in the distant wild, unwanted. The infant Brom was abandoned in the wilderness by its own parents and was soon found by a pack of wolves.”

“Brom was raised by wolves?” asked Davlo. “Remarkable!”

“No, Brom ate the wolves,” said Azimuth. “And anything else it could catch. I raised Brom.”

“You don’t seem the paternal sort,” said Grimnir.

“You don’t know me,” said Azimuth. “You think you do, but you don’t. I’m not some one-note, revenge-minded lunatic. I have tender feelings too. When I happened upon young Brom happily playing with the bones of its victims in the Valley of Broken Skulls, I was seized at once with empathy for the creature’s plight.”

“How touching,” said Davlo.

“I was also seized by Brom,” said Azimuth. “I would have been devoured had I not startled it with a Nova Burst. Brom had never experienced Magick, nor felt its effects. It dropped me at once. I then did my best to kill the creature, but my strongest spells merely amused Brom, who took them for a pretty light show. This was as good as a Charm magick. Which, by the way, has no effect on Brom, if you were thinking of trying it.”

“So you adopted Brom?” asked Davlo.

“Poor, lonely Brom, cast out, rejected, sent to live or die alone far from home – we were so much alike,” said Azimuth. “I knew I had to raise Brom as my own child.”

“And your ultimate weapon,” said Grimnir.

Azimuth shrugged. “The Staff of Imbalance is my ultimate weapon. But Brom is a close second.”

“What of Brom’s true parents?” asked Davlo.

“I am Brom’s true parent!” said Azimuth. “The only one Brom has ever known.”

"If you say so," said Davlo. "But Brom came from somewhere."

Azimuth shrugged. "I believe Brom is the offspring of Tor the Thunderer."

"Tor?" said Fafnir. "Are you sure?"

"Reasonably sure." Azimuth wore the horn of a bull on a cord around her neck. She raised it to her hood and called up to Brom: "Brom! Sparks!"

"SPARKS!" rumbled Brom.

KRA-ZZZA-KROOM!

Twin thunderbolts shot out of Brom's electric blue eyes and incinerated a hapless Troll.

"Lightning attacks will not avail," muttered Grimmir.

"Nor any other," sneered Azimuth.

"And the mother?" asked Davlo.

"Frost giant, I believe."

"The blue tint of Brom's skin suggests as much," said Grimmir.

"Brom!" shouted Azimuth through the horn. "Brrr!"

"BRRRRR!" boomed Brom. The giant took a deep breath, incidentally sucking in a couple of the vultures perched on one shoulder. Brom's cheeks puffed out like sky balloons. Then it exhaled a wintry blast of ice crystals that flash froze a squad of Orcs. With a giggle that set off a landslide on the western slope, Brom brought a ship-sized foot down on the Orc-sicles, shattering them into icy nuggets.

"And that confirms it," added Grimmir.

"Brom! Brom! Brom!" chanted all the monsters of the horde, Orc, Goblin and Troll alike. Brom's callous destruction of their comrades seemed only to increase the horde's respect for the giant.

"I have wasted enough time with you three," said Azimuth. "The moon approaches its zenith. I must ascend to the Temple of the Sign and make ready."

"We *will* stop you," said Davlo.

“Your bluster grows tiresome,” said Azimuth. “Brom! I am going up the steps! No one is to follow me, do you hear? None shall pass!”

“NONE SHALL PASS,” vowed Brom.

“Before this hour ends, I will be absolute ruler of time and space,” said Azimuth. “Absolutely nothing can stop me now. Nothing at—”

A familiar voice boomed across the valley from the top of Boot Mountain. “Ho! Wizard of the Purple! Again we are met! No Wizard can escape the avenging sword of Sullen the Barbarian!”

40: BLOOD AND GLORY

“Yea, even across the valley I spy you with my hawk-keen gaze, honed in the frosty mountain heights of my native Simmeria!” continued Sullen. “Across the trackless miles I have tracked you, through hill and forest, swamp and valley!”

“We didn’t go through any swamps,” said Fafnir. “What route did Stinky take?”

“I heard that, Little Green Wizard!” said Sullen sharply. “I can hear the whisper of a sparrows wings at a thousand paces! I can scent my prey like a coursing hound! Sullen is the greatest tracker of them all! Nowhere can you go that Sullen cannot follow! I swore to gut you like pigs and so I shall, by Cram!”

Azimuth’s raised the Magick bullhorn to her lips. “Stinking witless savage! An army stands between us! Even an overdeveloped oaf like you cannot beat an entire army by yourself!”

Sullen laughed a deep and hearty laugh. “Then it is well that Sullen brought his own army!”

Sullen lifted a polished moose horn to his lips and sounded a great blast that rolled down the valley like thunder in a barrel. A second horn answered from the east ridge, and a third horn from the west. There was motion on the heights and thousands of tall, rangy warriors clad in furs

and leather appeared, all shouting and beating their weapons against their shields. The wild warriors lifted banners and totems beneath the silvered moon – the paw print of the Dog Tribe, the antler badge of the Moose Clan, the cracked skull of the Bone Breakers, the snowman of the Winter People. The Roamers of the Plains and the Folk of the Hills and the Children of the Forest – all and more were gathered.

“This cannot be!” said Azimuth.

Sullen laughed. “Misbegotten mumbler! I am Sullen! My blade has tasted the blood of ten thousand foes! I have forgotten more about winning battles than you will ever learn! All the wild free peoples of Midgård, all who revel in Wind and Sun and Sky, join together gladly to fight by my side! Is it not so, my assorted siblings of indeterminate gender?”

“Sullen!” shouted the Dog Tribe.

“Sullen!” replied the Moose Clan.

“Sullen!” said all the rest.

“Blood and Glory!” shouted Sullen. “Blood and Glory for all!”

Sullen’s warriors loosed a volley of arrows and spears into the sea of Orcs and Goblins below, then charged down the slope to meet them. This was not the most tactically sound approach, but it was the barbarian way – they craved the glory of hand-to-hand combat and the visceral thrill of hacking off limbs and splitting skulls. Dealing death from a distance was always less satisfying. (This may in part explain the traditional barbarian antipathy for Wizards.)

Sullen bounded down the cliff like a spider monkey, ignoring the treacherous path to leap from handhold to handhold until he reached the valley floor in a fraction of the time it took the Wizards. He drew his great sword and hacked a gore-washed path through the horde.

Surrounded on three sides, the Orcs, Goblins, and Trolls fell against each other in confusion and panic. Some

even attacked their supposed allies out of sheer habit. It appeared the battle might become a rout.

"I haven't time for this," said Azimuth. She pointed toward Sullen and shouted through the horn: "Brom! Kill them all!"

"ALL WILL DIE!" boomed Brom.

Brom swept the heights with blasts of lightning, incinerating the few barbarians who remained there and sending deadfalls of rock tumbling onto the heads of the combatants below.

"Brom!" cheered Orc and Goblin alike, given new courage by their champion joining the fray.

The giant crossed the valley in a few long strides, crushing any too slow to get out of the way. Monster and barbarian alike scrambled to do just that, blurring the battle lines and turning the contest into even more of a melee.

Only one warrior did not flee from Brom.

Sullen made straight for the giant.

"This should be good," said Fafnir.

"We're not here as spectators," said Grimnir, grabbing Fafnir's arm. He pointed to the top of the temple mound, where Azimuth mounted the last step and moved out of view, into the Temple of the Sign.

"After her!" said Davlo.

41: HIGH MOON

The Temple of the Sign was a ruin. Tufts of dead grass and a few stunted shrubs pierced the cracked and stained marble flagstones that paved the top of the mound. The broken remains of eight marble columns described a circle around a smooth metal disk set into the ground at the center of the space. Half the columns were only stumps. Two had toppled and lay in heaps of shattered stone. The two pillars still standing were engraved with elemental symbols in the Old Runes.

The grayish-white disk was not iron, bronze or any metal the Wizards recognized. It was free of rust or discoloration of any kind and glimmered cold and stark beneath the moon. Etched into its surface was a sign that Grinnir was startled to see – the ancient serpentine symbol for the mysterious Ninth Element!

In the center of this great seal stood Azimuth. She was illuminated by a shaft of moonlight that seemed to come straight down upon her like a pouring of molten silver. She stood with her head tilted back to face the full moon. The Staff of Imbalance was raised high with both hands. Azimuth recited feverishly, over and over, what sounded like several verses of bad poetry in a made-up language.

“Nothing is happening,” said Fafnir. “After all this, the old bat is completely bonkers!”

At that moment, something happened.

The Staff of Imbalance flared, casting an omnidirectional rainbow spray of light. The colors swirled up the pillar of pale moonlight like fruit punch sucked into a straw, filling it with color. There was a rushing sound, more felt than heard, as if all the tides of all the oceans were coming in at once.

A nimbus of the same riot of colors surrounded Azimuth, colors reflecting and refracting all the Eight Elements as their power infused her form.

"IT BEGINS," she said. "YOU ARE TOO LATE."

"We're not taking your word for that," said Davlo.

But before the Wizards could make a move a cold wind swept across the mound. It smelled of attar and grave clothes and rotting flesh. An oval of blackness appeared and out of it rode eight riders on pale fleshless rocking horses with glowing red eyes and fire in their nostrils.

Seven of the riders wore sombreros and colorful ponchos. One was a grim wraith, beside it a weird-fleshed ghoul. Three skeletons armed with swords. A wight, aglow with soul-fire. And a zombie, barely holding itself together.

The eighth rider wore a black Wizard's robe and a fancy flat-brimmed hat pushed down low.

"Death on a cracker," said Fafnir.

"Or at least on a pale horse," said Davlo.

"Not so fast," said Grimnir, who noticed the lead rider held not the Grim Reaper's scythe, but a simple Wizard's staff.

The black rider pushed its hat back and pointed an accusing finger, saying, "Azimuth! I'm calling you out. You and me got unfinished business."

Azimuth recoiled. Momentary dread of Death made her forget she was on the verge of ultimate power.

"Hey, I know that voice," said Fafnir.

"Tuonetar!" cried Davlo. "You live! But how?"

"Long story," said Tuonetar, for the black rider was

indeed she. “We’ll catch up after I settle things with this two-bit maggoty moose.”

Azimuth, realizing her error, laughed. “TOO LATE, FOOLS! IT HAS BEGUN! SOON I WILL BE INVINCIBLE!”

42: DEAD AGAIN

Let us now pause our tale and rewind to that awful moment when Tuonetar vanished into the bottomless depths of the Well of Lost Souls.

“Tuonetar! We will avenge you!”

With Davlo’s cry ringing in her ears, Tuonetar fell.

And fell.

And fell.

She continued falling for a very long time. Long enough for all the events of her life to pass before her eyes. And then again. And then a third time.

The fourth time, she tried to think of something else.

Like how much she hated the thought of dying.

And all the little things she’d miss.

She’d miss breathing.

Truly, there was pleasure in taking a nice deep breath, holding it, and then letting it out slowly. People breathed all day without taking time to enjoy it.

She’d miss Fafnir. A bit of a dunce, Faf, but not a bad sort. Always good for a laugh, anyway.

Laughter. She’d miss laughing.

Grimnir, not so much. So, well, grim and serious all the time. And such a know-it-all. Something off about that one.

But Davlo she would surely miss. Him calling to her was the last thing she heard in life.

It would do.

What else?

Butterflies.

Butterflies were pretty. She would miss butterflies.

Oh ... and one more thing.

She would miss not getting to choke the frosty flaming Hel of out that arrogant moose-get who had killed her – Azimuth!

If vengeance from beyond the grave can be had, like the old stories say, then by all the bloody dripping gods above and below, I will have my revenge! Azimuth, beware!

Such were Tuonetar's thoughts when she at last stopped falling.

THUD!

She landed in sand. It didn't hurt, but she got a mouthful and sat up spitting. She was alone in a sandy, barren wasteland. The air was cold and stale, like the inside of a tomb. Thick mists rolled low across the ground. There seemed to be no sky. The moon was nowhere to be seen, nor any stars – just a black empty nothing above. The only light came from a guttering torch set atop a pile of skulls.

Nice. Where am I?

She retrieved her staff, which lay nearby.

A torch implies someone to light it. And a stack of skulls implies ... erm, nothing good.

Tuonetar took two cautious steps ... and suddenly was flapping her arms and fighting to keep her balance. She had almost stepped over the edge of a cliff.

“Not ready for another long fall just now,” she said. She backed away from the edge.

The mists shifted to reveal a wooden bridge across a wide, deep abyss.

In the middle of the bridge, standing tall, dark, and cadaverous, was ... Death.

If Tuonetar had any doubts about just who she was facing, perhaps entertaining the notion that the black-robed

figure was a trick of mist in the strange bleak light, Death dispelled them with his first rasping words:

“COWER, BRIEF MORTAL!”

Tuonetar drew back, then decided she’d had enough of being pushed around for one day.

“Why should I?” she said.

“I AM DEATH AND THIS IS MY REALM. FEAR ME.”

Death brandished his soul-sharp Scythe of Extermination for emphasis.

“If I’m already dead, why should I fear you?”

“AH. ERM. BECAUSE ... YOU’RE NOT DEAD? YET.”

“I’m not?”

“DIDN’T YOU KNOW?”

“I just assumed.” Tuonetar pinched herself. “I feel not dead,” she said. “But chilly. This is my summer robe.”

“YOU ARE NOT DEAD, YET YOU ARE HERE. PUZZLING.”

“I’ll say.”

“HOW DID YOU GET HERE?”

“I fell down a well,” said Tuonetar bitterly.

“A WELL?”

“The Well of Lost Souls. In the barbarian lands.”

Death nodded. “OH, YES, I KNOW THE PLACE. THE DEATH DRUIDS TOSSED MANY SACRIFICES DOWN THAT PIT BACK IN THE DAY. DREARY BUNCH.”

“Seems a bit of an oxymoron. ‘Death Druid’, I mean.”

“MORONS TO BE SURE,” said Death. “LOVED THEIR DEATH CHANTS, THEY DID. ON AND ON WITH THE DEATH CHANTS. AND SO DEMANDING. WANTED SOMETHING EVERY SINGLE TIME THEY SENT SOMEONE DOWN THE CHUTE. EVERY. SINGLE. TIME. ‘OH, GREAT DEATH, GRANT US POWERS, GRANT US FAVORS!’

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH.”

“That must have been long ago,” said Tuonetar. “The place seemed out of use.”

Death scratched behind where his ear would be if he had ears. “OH, THE DEATH DRUIDS ARE DONE, TO BE SURE. BUT BACK TO YOU. YOU’RE AN ANOMALY. YOU DON’T BELONG HERE.”

“Then send me back,” said Tuonetar.

“IT DOESN’T WORK THAT WAY. YOU MUST WIN YOUR WAY BACK TO THE LIVING WORLD.”

“How do I do that?”

Death turned away from her and started across the bridge. “FOLLOW ME.”

43: GRAVE GOODS

“HEL’S BELLS! ARE YOU SURE YOU’VE NEVER PLAYED THIS GAME BEFORE?”

Death threw his DecayStation5 controller down in disgust. On the glass screen set up opposite his stony throne, the image of a ship with black sails broke in two and slipped beneath the waves. Little cartoon pirates fell overboard and drowned or were devoured by sharks.

“Yes!” said Tuonetar. She jumped up from her couch placed near the throne and did a victory dance across the black and white tiles. “In your bony face!”

On screen, the pirates aboard the ship she controlled raised their swords and cheered.

“I’M TIRED OF PLAYING *CALL OF BOOTY*,” said Death. “YOU’RE TOO GOOD AT IT.”

“Yes,” said Tuonetar, dropping back onto the couch. “I’ve only won every scenario.”

“IT SEEMS ‘LUCK’ IS WITH YOU.”

“That and good hand-eye coordination. I’m a Wizard after all.”

“MAYBE PVP WAS A BAD CALL. WANT TO TRY ADVENTURE MODE? WE’D BE ON THE SAME SIDE.”

Tuonetar put down her controller. “Have I won passage back to my world yet?”

“ER...”

“Well?”

“TECHNICALLY, YES. BUT IF YOU WANT TO PLAY SOME MORE, YOU CAN STAY A BIT.”

Tuonetar shook her head. “Some other time.”

Death sighed. It was a sound like the dreams of a wasted life vanishing on the wind.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Tuonetar added hastily. “It’s mad fun manipulating ships full of cartoon pirates who live in a fantastical world that lacks Magick. And sinking your ship repeatedly, of course. But I didn’t fall down the Well of Lost Souls. I was pushed. I have to get back. My friends are in danger. The whole world is in danger.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?”

Tuonetar explained about Azimuth and the Staff of Imbalance and her mad plan to remake or destroy the world.

“She doesn’t seem to care which,” added Tuonetar.

“DESTROY THE WORLD?” said Death. “THAT WON’T DO AT ALL! WE HAVEN’T THE CAPACITY FOR A MASS EXTINCTION! NOWHERE TO PUT SO MANY SOULS AT ONCE!”

“Then send me back! My friends and I will stop her!”

Death stood. “AS ‘LUCK’ WOULD HAVE IT, I AM OWNER OF A TRAVEL AGENCY. I SHALL RETURN YOU TO YOUR WORLD FREE OF CHARGE.”

“Great!”

“AND TO HELP YOU SAVE THE WORLD – AND SAVE ME A LOT OF AGGRAVATION – I SHALL DISPATCH MY MINIONS TO ASSIST YOU.”

“Minions?”

Death snapped his bony fingers – which was more of a scraping sound than a snap. Instantly, an impressive array of dangerous undead entities appeared.

If by impressive one means “seven”.

“THESE ARE ALL I HAVE ON SHORT NOTICE,”

said Death. "BUT TRUST ME, THESE SEVEN ARE MAGNIFICENT." He introduced them one by one:

"YUL." A grim wraith who tipped his hat to Tuonetar.

"M'QN." A grinning shiny-fleshed ghoul.

"HORS." A spectrally glowing wight.

"BRONS, VAWN, COB." Three skeleton warriors who made their bones as mercenaries.

"AND DEX." A zombie rotten to the core.

"Pleased to meet you all," said Tuonetar.

"THEY WILL OBEY YOU AS IF YOU WERE ME," said Death.

"Excellent," said Tuonetar.

"ACTUALLY, IF YOU NEED ME TOO, JUST GIVE ME A CALL. 555-DEATH."

Death snapped his fingers again and eight red-eyed, fire-breathing nightmare rocking ponies appeared. "YOUR STEEDS," said Death.

He handed Tuonetar the black hat.

It fit perfectly over her hood.

"The little skull tassels are a nice touch," she said. "Thank you."

"YOU'RE WELCOME."

Tuonetar noticed for the first time that her yellow robe had turned black. This pleased her.

Tuonetar turned to her spectral posse. "Saddle up and ride! We're off to see the Wizard."

We now rejoin the reunited Wizards in their showdown with the rogue Wizard Azimuth, already in progress...

44: CRISS-CROSS

“TOO LATE, FOOLS! IT HAS BEGUN! SOON I WILL BE INVINCIBLE!”

“So you are not invincible now?” asked Davlo.

“ALMOST,” admitted Azimuth. “BUT NOT QUITE.”

“Then we still have a chance to defeat you!”

“A SMALL CHANCE. A VERY SMALL CHANCE.”

“We will take it,” said Davlo.

“BAH!” said Azimuth. “THE MOON WILL SOON REACH PERFECT ALIGNMENT WITH THE COSMIC AXIS. EVEN NOW, THE ELEMENTS FLOW INTO ME LIKE A RISING TIDE.”

“The tide is about to go out,” said Tuonetar.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD,” said Azimuth.

“Oh yeah? Well you — ” The wraith tapped her shoulder. “Excuse me a second,” she said. “Yes, Yul?” The wraith leaned close and whispered something to Tuonetar. To the others its voice was like the muffled, distant terror screams of someone buried alive. “I see,” said Tuonetar. She glanced over at the rest of the posse. “Seems my gang can’t stay here, seeing as they’re all cursed undead and this here is sacred ground, despite its state of disrepair.”

“There are lots of Orcs and Goblins down in the valley they could go haunt,” suggested Davlo.

“How’s that?” asked Tuonetar. Yul the wraith and his

comrades all nodded eagerly. “Then run along and have your fun,” she said. “We’ll regroup after I finish up here.”

She dismounted. The wraith uttered a soul-chilling cry that echoed across the valley, causing every living being below, barbarian and monster alike, to freeze. Then it led the seven riders (and Tuonetar’s riderless horse) down the steps to do what the undead do so well.

“Sorry,” said Tuonetar. “I thought they’d be more help. But they did make for quite a grand entrance. Now let’s settle this like Wizards.”

She conjured a blast of thermo-volcanic Steam. The dense cloud of superheated vapor vanished short of Azimuth – and reappeared to blast Fafnir off his feet.

“Careful!” said Fafnir. “You almost broiled me!”

Davlo and Grinnir summoned an Earth barrage and a beam of Death Ice respectively. As with Tuonetar’s gambit their attacks went inexplicably awry, vanishing short of their true target and striking each other instead.

Fafnir cast a Fireball Strike, which promptly set Tuonetar ablaze. She calmly wet herself to douse the flames.

Azimuth laughed. “I BEND THE ELEMENTS TO MY WILL.”

“If so, why do you need an army of monsters?” mocked Davlo.

Azimuth frowned. “CONTINGENCY.”

“What?”

“SUPPOSE I GOT HERE AND THE STAFF OF IMBALANCE WAS A DUD? OR I MISSPOKE SOME CRUCIAL PHRASE AND THE INCANTATION FIZZLED? KEEPING A HORDE OF MONSTERS AS BACKUP IS SIMPLY SOUND CONTINGENCY PLANNING.”

“Point well taken,” said Grinnir.

He shot Azimuth with a thin stream of Water, nothing more than a novelty Staff of Soaking might produce. The Water vanished short of target, only to reappear and

comically squirt Davlo in the face.

“You’ve created a distortion field that deflects our spells against our comrades,” said Grimmir.

“PERCEPTIVE,” said Azimuth. “ATTACK ME AND YOU HARM EACH OTHER. YOU CANNOT STOP ME.”

“We shall see,” said Grimmir. He turned and blasted Davlo with a tremendous beam of Death Fire. The flames cut out short of Davlo and engulfed Azimuth like a holiday bonfire.

“That ... was a risky experiment,” said Davlo.

“But a successful one,” said Grimmir.

“Indeed. Allow me to return the favor.” Davlo launched a Tempest Ice Storm at Grimmir. The distortion field rerouted the electric hail to Azimuth.

“Oh, yes!” cried Tuonetar. She let loose a barrage of Scorched Earth, Steam Storms, Blazing Lava Blasts and overclocked Death rays at Fafnir. Azimuth took the full brunt of her assault. Fafnir threw Heatwaves and Electric Rockslides back at Tuonetar.

Davlo and Grimmir assailed each other with devastating spells of Earth and Water, Cold and Ice. All four companions attacked each other with every spell they knew, and even invented a few new combinations on the spot. The unrelenting barrage soon reduced Azimuth’s defenses to metaphorical rubble. Steamed, pummeled, drenched, shocked, scalded, toasted, and zapped, the rogue Wizard buckled to her knees. Random sparks of static danced across her singed and tattered robe. Plumes of steam wafted from inside her hood.

But she still held the Staff of Imbalance.

45: SHARPER THAN A SERPENT

“CLEVER CHILDREN,” gasped Azimuth. “NOW LEARN THE TRUE POWER OF MAGICK!”

She levered herself to her feet with the Staff. She whipped her head side to side like a prizefighter shaking off a tremendous roundhouse punch. Emerald light flowed out of her hood like phosphorescent syrup until she was surrounded in a bubble of pure Life force.

“OBSERVE.”

Azimuth’s body absorbed the green sphere like a sponge sucking up dishwater. When the last flicker of green was gone, all her burns, bruises and abrasions were gone.

“ALL BETTER,” said Azimuth. “A BRAVE EFFORT, YOUNG WIZARDS, BUT FUTILE. AND NOW – MY TURN.”

Azimuth gestured. Bands of light inside the column of elemental power coalesced into a huge elemental Water serpent. The liquid snake writhed like the rapids of a flood-swollen river.

A second serpent swirled into existence, this one pure Cold, with unblinking eyes of mist. It fixed its gaze on Fafnir and spat its frosty venom, which froze Fafnir solid.

“I COMMAND THE ELEMENTS. I AM BEYOND WORKING MAGICK. I *AM* MAGICK!”

A flashing, sizzling serpent of Lightning formed next, joined by a Death serpent. This pair spat Lightning and

Death beams at Tuonetar until she fell to the ground twitching spasmodically with her eyes rolled back in her head. As her hand jerked, she involuntarily sent her staff rolling over the edge of the temple mound and bouncing down to the ground.

Now the entire nest of elemental serpents twisted and hissed (well, the Lightning snake more crackled and popped) and stared balefully at Grimnir and Davlo.

“ONE LAST CHANCE,” said Azimuth. “YOU TWO SHOW PROMISE. YOU NEED NOT DIE WITH THE REST. YOU CAN BE THE FIRST TO JOIN MY NEW ORDER OF AZIMUTH.”

“Order of Azimuth?” said Davlo.

“HENCEFORTH, AZIMUTH IS MAGICK AND MAGICK IS AZIMUTH.”

“We shall see,” said Grimnir.

“YOU SHALL. EMBRACE MY NEW ORDER. I WILL NEED CAPABLE LIEUTENANTS TO ENFORCE MY WILL WHILE I AM BUSY REORDERING THE COSMOS.”

“Never!” said Davlo.

A serpent of Fire coalesced. It eyed the Wizards hungrily.

“YOU BOTH HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE. AND FOR POWER – DON’T DENY IT! I CAN REVEAL TO YOU THE GREATEST MYSTERIES OF MAGICK AND THE UNIVERSE. ALL ARE OPEN TO ME NOW. I WILL RAISE YOU UP AS GREAT PRINCES OF THE WORLD. SURELY THAT IS BETTER THAN BEING THE ERRAND BOYS OF DOTTERING OLD FOOLS?”

“And if we refuse your generous offer?” asked Davlo.

“BE THE FIRST TO SERVE ME, OR BE THE FIRST TO DIE.”

“Bah!” said Davlo. “Your vision is no better than that of the crudest Orc chieftain – power for its own sake! Taking what you can from those weaker than you!”

Azimuth’s seethed. “LIAR. I WILL MAKE THE WORLD A MUCH BETTER PLACE. CLEAN, BRIGHT AND ORDERLY. I

OFFER YOU A PLACE OF HONOR IN THIS BETTER WORLD.
YET YOU REFUSE ME?"

"We want no place in a world made by you," said Davlo.

"SO BE IT." Azimuth raised her arms higher.

The elemental serpents coiled to strike.

But in the instant before the writhing nest of elemental serpents attacked, Azimuth recoiled.

Something was horribly wrong.

"NO!" she shouted. "WAIT! WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

It was too late. The five giant snakes of power plunged their heads downward with open jaws toward ... Azimuth!

The raw power of five pure elements coursed through the Wizard's body. She flew into the air, jerked and shuddered as if stabbed through the heart, then collapsed, slamming to the stones to lay unmoving on her back in the very center of the Sign, her body broken and blasted beyond repair.

The serpents faded into little flickers of light. With the ceremony interrupted, the column of elemental power, subjected to no active will and no longer harnessed by the Staff, shimmered and vanished – still there, but invisible to the naked eye.

"What happened?" asked Azimuth. She coughed violently and spit up a gob of thick, gooey phlegm.

Grimnir stood over the dying Wizard. "While Davlo distracted you with his babble, I cast a simple Confusion magick. In your befuddlement, you gave a command for the elemental serpents to strike you, not us. You defeated yourself."

"Well done," admitted Azimuth. She coughed and locked gaze with Grimnir. "I am dying. Come closer ... young Grimnir. This alignment ... will not return ... for a thousand years ... You must—"

Azimuth breathed her last.

Her hand unclenched, releasing the Staff of Imbalance.

"Azimuth is dead," said Grimnir.

Davlo eased back against the pillar, for he was suddenly very weary. "Then the world is saved."

"Not yet." Grimnir flung his staff aside.

"Grimnir?" said Davlo. "Is something wrong?"

Grimnir picked up the Staff of Imbalance.

"Far from it."

46: TURN AND FACE THE CHANGE

“What are you doing?” asked Davlo.

“What must be done,” said Grimmir.

Grimmir moved Azimuth’s lifeless body aside with a Push and stepped onto the Sign, taking the mad Wizard’s place. He imitated Azimuth’s former posture, with his arms held high and head thrown back. He repeated, from memory, the Rite of Imbalance recited by Azimuth.

The moon remained at its peak, and the walls of the multiverse were still weak. The cosmos responded to his invocation and, once again, the Staff of Imbalance flared to life, radiating a prismatic spray of elemental light. The shaft of moonlight swirled and shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow, and other colors not usually perceptible by human eyes. The power of all the elements flowed toward the Staff and its new owner.

Davlo shook his head, not wanting to believe what his eyes were showing him. “Grimmir! You must stop!”

“THIS POWER SHOULD NOT BE WASTED,” said Grimmir. His amplified voice reverberated with massive power. Beams of uncanny light shone out of his hood.

“Grimmir! No! This is what we came to prevent!”

“FATE BROUGHT US HERE. FATE BROUGHT THE STAFF OF IMBALANCE TO MY HAND. I AM FATED TO RESTORE IMBALANCE TO THE ELEMENTS. IT IS FATE, MY FRIEND.”

“It is madness.”

“NOT MADNESS, DAVLO. PERFECTION. I SEE THE HEMS AND STITCHES OF THE UNIVERSE. I SEE CREATION RUNNING THROUGH MY FINGERS LIKE GRAINS OF SAND. I TASTE LIGHTNING. I FEEL SENSATIONS I NEVER IMAGINED RIDING THROUGH MY VEINS: TIME AND SPACE. FLOW AND FLUX.”

“Grimnir, please! You must let go.”

“I SEE THE FLAWS AND HOW TO FIX THEM. WE ARE ALL CONNECTED, EVERY KIND AND CREATURE. ALL SHOULD BE PEACE. MAGICK, IT SURROUNDS US AND PENETRATES US. IT BINDS THE WORLD TOGETHER.”

“Please, my friend,” said Davlo. “Drop the Staff and step away.”

“IT'S BEAUTIFUL! IT'S BEAUTIFUL!”

“It is power no Wizard should have!”

“DAVLO, IF ONLY YOU COULD SEE. I WILL SHOW YOU. I WILL SHOW ALL OF MIDGÅRD. I SEE HOW THE PIECES FIT TOGETHER. I SEE WHAT CAN BE DONE. I SEE WHAT *MUST* BE DONE.”

“Again, I beg you, please – step away.”

“I CANNOT. I WILL NOT.”

“You give me no choice. I am sorry.”

Davlo cast a High Steam Lightning Beam.

Nothing happened.

No Magick at all.

Davlo's spell fizzled entirely.

Then his staff broke in his hand, rendered powerless. The two halves clattered to the stones.

“I CONTROL ALL MAGICK,” said Grimnir. “NO SPELL CAN HARM ME.”

“Azimuth couldn't do that.”

“SHE COULD HAVE. SHE HAD THE WRONG FRAME OF MIND.”

“I still have my sword!” Davlo drew his sword and imbued it with Death Fire. A tiny red spark flared at the

point of the blade, then winked out.

“TSK, TSK.” Grimmir wagged his finger. Davlo’s sword froze solid, then shattered into thousands of tiny fragments.

“I still have, erm, time to think of something else,” said Davlo.

“THE TRANSFORMATION IS ALMOST COMPLETE.” Grimmir hovered a couple of feet off the ground. “SOON I WILL BE—”

“Invincible?” Davlo nodded toward Azimuth’s corpse.

“—INFUSED WITH ABSOLUTE CONTROL OVER EVERY ELEMENT. I WILL BE AS ONE WITH THE UNIVERSE.”

“And then?”

“THEN EVERYTHING CHANGES ... FOR THE BETTER.”

47: FOR BETTER ... OR FOR WORSE?

“Better according to whom?” said Davlo. “You, Grimmir?”

“YES! DAVLO, I SEE MORE CLEARLY THAN YOU COULD EVER BELIEVE POSSIBLE. I SEE INFINITY. I SEE ALL POSSIBILITY. I SEE WHAT MUST BE DONE.”

Davlo shook his head in violent disagreement. “Listen to yourself, Grimmir! You speak the words of a tyrant. This is not what we were taught. This is not how Wizards behave.”

“WE WERE TAUGHT LIES, DAVLO. HAVE YOU NOT BEEN PAYING ATTENTION. FANDULF, YIX, EVEN OLD JOAD – THEY LIED TO US, KEPT THINGS FROM US.”

“For our own good!” said Davlo. “And the good of the world!”

Grimmir laughed. “LIES FOR OUR OWN GOOD – NOW WHO MOUTHS THE EXCUSES OF A TYRANT, DAVLO?”

“But...”

“I WILL ELIMINATE THE NEED FOR LIES FOREVER,” said Grimmir. The multi-colored lights of the elements flared and swirled faster around him.

“No...” Davlo clenched his fist. “Whatever you do will be done *to* the rest of us. You force me to stop you, my friend.”

“YOU CANNOT STOP ME. I CONTROL ALL MAGICK AND – OOF!”

Moving with the speed of the gifted athlete he was – one trained in all the combative arts of wrestling, rugby, and Myrkurian thumb-boxing – Davlo charged across the intervening ground and slammed Grimnir to the ground with a flying tackle that knocked him off the Sign of Nine and out of the coruscating pillar of elemental power.

Grimnir landed on his back with Davlo atop him.

“Magick is not all there is,” said Davlo. He effortlessly pinned Grimnir in a submission hold.

“WHAT HAVE YOU ... no!” said Grimnir. The pillar of power faded like a dissipating swarm of fireflies. “My transformation was not complete! Let me up!”

Grimnir tried to rise. Davlo kept his friend immobilized.

“The moon is moving out of alignment!” wailed Grimnir.

“Good!” said Davlo. “The multiverse will be safe for another thousand years. By then it will be someone else’s problem.” He sighed. “Or so one might hope.”

“Please, Davlo! You must let me finish! There may still be time! You know not what you do!”

“Perhaps not. But neither do you.”

“I won’t let you stop me!” said Grimnir. Though his connection to all Magick was broken, he was still a Wizard and he still, somewhat improbably, held the Staff of Imbalance in his grip. Grimnir began a terrible spell of Fire and Earth that would force brave Davlo to release him.

Bereft of his own staff, and with his hands full, Davlo had no defense except using his head. Which is exactly what he did. Davlo’s high, noble brow was a formidable weapon. He head-butted Grimnir, who cried out in pain as his nose crunched and spurted blood. Grimnir lost his spell. He also lost his grip on the Staff.

Davlo released Grimnir, snatched up the Staff of Imbalance and tossed it behind him. The Staff flew into the fading column of elemental energy and hovered like a mirage – for so it was, the mirage of ultimate power, a

power too great for any mortal to possess.

A silent burst of white light, brilliant as day, flashed in every direction, all the way to the horizon. Then, as if yanked into the sky by an invisible string, the Staff of Imbalance flew up the pillar of power at incredible speed and vanished into the heavens.

“Nooooooooo!” cried Grimnir. “Come back!”

The elemental energies evaporated into flickering sparks. A huge silver cloud obscured the moon.

It was truly over.

Or was it?

Grimnir, his gushing tears mingled with the blood that flowed from his ruined nose, reached beseeching arms to the sky. “Come back,” he repeated piteously. “Come back.” He turned his sorrowful gaze on Davlo, who saw in his friend’s face a sadness that would break the heart of an angel. “What have you done?” said Grimnir. “It was so beautiful.”

Grimnir wept.

Davlo turned away, wondering if he had done the right thing.

He would wonder for many, many years to come.

48: FOUR LONG SHADOWS

The hour is late, so it is time to put this tale to bed so you may go and do likewise.

Davlo found Tuonetar's staff and with it thawed Fafnir and healed Tuonetar and himself. Grimmir refused treatment, wearing his broken nose like an accusation.

At the base of the temple mound, the Wizards found a very dead Brom, its body oozing blood from a thousand sword cuts. In the days to come, many songs would be sung of mighty Sullen's epic duel with the giant. But this, again, is a tale of Wizards, not warriors, so the details of their fight, however interesting and amusing, are unimportant. It matters only that Sullen won.

With Brom's fall, the Orcs, Trolls and Goblins scattered. Sullen – with the madness of battle and lust for slaughter upon him – led his barbarians in pursuit of the fleeing monster horde, completely forgetting that he had come to slay Wizards. Which was just as well.

The seven dead desperados who accompanied Tuonetar from Niflheim materialized before her and accepted her thanks. Despite their admittedly impressive arrival, their aid was ultimately inconsequential. Nevertheless, Tuonetar was gracious in her praise. Moreover the Dead Riders had sent many new residents to their master's realm. What happened to them afterward is a matter of dispute. Some say they

returned to the afterlife, their mission done. Others believe they haunt the lost valley of the Temple of the Sign even to this day, scaring away any who might seek there for traces of the Staff of Imbalance or the power with which no mortal should meddle.

The journey home was filled with quiet sobs, regretful sighs, muttered curses, frequent petty arguments, and long, awkward silences. For though they had succeeded in their mission and saved the world, victory came at a fearful price. The four young Wizards never spoke again of the events of that night at the Temple of the Sign, except in an oblique passive-aggressive way or after drinking heavily.

Back at Castle Aldrheim, Grimnir grew immersed in his studies, delving deeply into the secrets of Midgård's past and the mysteries of Magick. He soon abandoned his customary red robes in favor of purple. No doubt this was an effort to reaffirm his close friendship with Davlo, as red and blue blend to make purple. But perhaps he had other reasons for this curious fashion choice. Grimnir was also occasionally heard talking to himself, muttering about the need for more privacy to conduct his experiments and how he ought to have a laboratory of his very own.

Tuonetar, after her near Death experience, stuck with the black robe, accessorizing it with her favorite black boots. She also began sketching ideas for a network of automated healing stations to be situated in dangerous locales across Midgård – checkpoints, you might call them – shrines to Life where Wizards could be healed and revitalized at need.

Fafnir too, was transformed in the aftermath of this great adventure. Due to frostbite damage, he never fully recovered the hearing in his left ear, which led to many misunderstandings through the years. He also became obsessed with recreating the late Joad's greatest secret – not the Ninth Element, but the lost recipe for his amazing cheese dip! Fafnir was very fired up about this, spending

endless hours in the kitchen. Mainly burning things, because he was not a very good cook. In the course of his quest, Fafnir packed on the pounds, which was a terrible drag on his health. Yes, a ferocious drag on his health.

As for handsome and mysterious Davlo ... he changed too, though in ways that were perhaps not so outwardly apparent. While his faith in the good to be done with Magick and the mission of the Order remained, Davlo had seen that noble intentions did not always lead to good and noble results. He had seen his good friend Grimnir succumb to temptation – and he had to wonder if someday he too might cross a line that should not be crossed.

But all was not gloomy. Far from it! Davlo and his friends had many other exciting adventures ahead of them.

Some of which turned out better than others.

There were days of glory ahead.

And days of not so much glory.

Even days of complete disaster.

But those are all tales for another day.

For now ... Good night, sleep tight, and don't let the, erm, bedbats bite!

AFTERWORD

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Well met in Midgård!

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